A Musical Instrument

BY [ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/elizabeth-barrett-browning)

**I.**

WHAT was he doing, the great god Pan,

    Down in the reeds by the river ?

Spreading ruin and scattering ban,

Splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat,

And breaking the golden lilies afloat

    With the dragon-fly on the river.

**II.**

He tore out a reed, the great god Pan,

    From the deep cool bed of the river :

The limpid water turbidly ran,

And the broken lilies a-dying lay,

And the dragon-fly had fled away,

    Ere he brought it out of the river.

**III.**

High on the shore sate the great god Pan,

    While turbidly flowed the river ;

And hacked and hewed as a great god can,

With his hard bleak steel at the patient reed,

Till there was not a sign of a leaf indeed

    To prove it fresh from the river.

**IV.**

He cut it short, did the great god Pan,

    (How tall it stood in the river !)

Then drew the pith, like the heart of a man,

Steadily from the outside ring,

And notched the poor dry empty thing

    In holes, as he sate by the river.

**V.**

This is the way,' laughed the great god Pan,

    Laughed while he sate by the river,)

The only way, since gods began

To make sweet music, they could succeed.'

Then, dropping his mouth to a hole in the reed,

    He blew in power by the river.

**VI.**

Sweet, sweet, sweet, O Pan !

    Piercing sweet by the river !

Blinding sweet, O great god Pan !

The sun on the hill forgot to die,

And the lilies revived, and the dragon-fly

    Came back to dream on the river.

**VII.**

Yet half a beast is the great god Pan,

    To laugh as he sits by the river,

Making a poet out of a man :

The true gods sigh for the cost and pain, —

For the reed which grows nevermore again

    As a reed with the reeds in the river.

POET[Elizabeth Barrett Browning](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/elizabeth-barrett-browning)

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Victorian](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=19)

SUBJECTS[Poetry & Poets](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=47), [Arts & Sciences](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=88), [Music](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=50)

POETIC TERMS[Rhymed Stanza,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)[Refrain](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=43)

The Charge of the Light Brigade

BY [ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/alfred-tennyson)

**I**

Half a league, half a league,

Half a league onward,

All in the valley of Death

   Rode the six hundred.

“Forward, the Light Brigade!

Charge for the guns!” he said.

Into the valley of Death

   Rode the six hundred.

**II**

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”

Was there a man dismayed?

Not though the soldier knew

   Someone had blundered.

   Theirs not to make reply,

   Theirs not to reason why,

   Theirs but to do and die.

   Into the valley of Death

   Rode the six hundred.

**III**

Cannon to right of them,

Cannon to left of them,

Cannon in front of them

   Volleyed and thundered;

Stormed at with shot and shell,

Boldly they rode and well,

Into the jaws of Death,

Into the mouth of hell

   Rode the six hundred.

**IV**

Flashed all their sabres bare,

Flashed as they turned in air

Sabring the gunners there,

Charging an army, while

   All the world wondered.

Plunged in the battery-smoke

Right through the line they broke;

Cossack and Russian

Reeled from the sabre stroke

   Shattered and sundered.

Then they rode back, but not

   Not the six hundred.

**V**

Cannon to right of them,

Cannon to left of them,

Cannon behind them

   Volleyed and thundered;

Stormed at with shot and shell,

While horse and hero fell.

They that had fought so well

Came through the jaws of Death,

Back from the mouth of hell,

All that was left of them,

   Left of six hundred.

**VI**

When can their glory fade?

O the wild charge they made!

   All the world wondered.

Honour the charge they made!

Honour the Light Brigade,

   Noble six hundred!

POET[Alfred, Lord Tennyson](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/alfred-tennyson) 1809–1892

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Victorian](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=19)

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POETIC TERMS[Rhymed Stanza,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)Elegy

My Last Duchess

BY [ROBERT BROWNING](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-browning)

*FERRARA*

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf’s hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said

“Fra Pandolf” by design, for never read

Strangers like you that pictured countenance,

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

But to myself they turned (since none puts by

The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)

And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,

How such a glance came there; so, not the first

Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ’twas not

Her husband’s presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek; perhaps

Fra Pandolf chanced to say, “Her mantle laps

Over my lady’s wrist too much,” or “Paint

Must never hope to reproduce the faint

Half-flush that dies along her throat.” Such stuff

Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough

For calling up that spot of joy. She had

A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,

Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er

She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

Sir, ’twas all one! My favour at her breast,

The dropping of the daylight in the West,

The bough of cherries some officious fool

Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule

She rode with round the terrace—all and each

Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked

Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked

My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name

With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame

This sort of trifling? Even had you skill

In speech—which I have not—to make your will

Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this

Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,

Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let

Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set

Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—

E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose

Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,

Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without

Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;

Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands

As if alive. Will’t please you rise? We’ll meet

The company below, then. I repeat,

The Count your master’s known munificence

Is ample warrant that no just pretense

Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;

Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed

At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go

Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,

Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

POET[Robert Browning](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-browning) 1812–1889

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Victorian](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=19)

SUBJECTS[Men & Women](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=10), [Relationships](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=77), [Arts & Sciences](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=88), [Marriage & Companionship](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=8), [Painting & Sculpture](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=52), [Social Commentaries](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=61), [History & Politics](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=57), [Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71)

POETIC TERMS[Couplet,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=20)[Dramatic Monologue,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=15)[Ekphrasis,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=52)[Persona](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=60)

Robert Browning

1812–1889



Although the early part of **Robert Browning’s** creative life was spent in comparative obscurity, he has come to be regarded as one of the most important poets of the Victorian period. His dramatic monologues and the psycho-historical epic*The Ring and the Book*(1868-1869), a novel in verse, have established him as a major figure in the history of English poetry. His claim to attention as a children’s writer is more modest, resting as it does almost entirely on one poem, “The Pied Piper of Hamelin,” included almost as an afterthought in *Bells and Pomegranites. No. III.—Dramatic Lyrics*(1842) and evidently never highly regarded by its creator. Nevertheless, “The Pied Piper” moved quickly into the canon of children’s literature, where it has remained ever since, receiving the dubious honor (shared by the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen and J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, 1911) of appearing almost as frequently in “adapted” versions as in the author’s original.

Browning was born on 7 May 1812 in Camberwell, a middle-class suburb of London; he was the only son of Robert Browning, a clerk in the Bank of England, and a devoutly religious German-Scotch mother, Sarah Anna Wiedemann Browning. He had a sister, Sarianna, who like her parents was devoted to her poet brother. While Mrs. Browning’s piety and love of music are frequently cited as important influences on the poet’s development, his father’s scholarly interests and unusual educational practices may have been equally significant, particularly in regard to Browning’s great children’s poem. The son of a wealthy banker, Robert Browning the elder had been sent in his youth to make his fortune in the West Indies, but he found the slave economy there so distasteful that he returned, hoping for a career in art and scholarship. A quarrel with his father and the financial necessity it entailed led the elder Browning to relinquish his dreams so as to support himself and his family through his bank clerkship.

Browning’s father amassed a personal library of some six thousand volumes, many of them collections of arcane lore and historical anecdotes that the poet plundered for poetic material, including the source of “The Pied Piper.” The younger Browning recalled his father’s unorthodox methods of education in his late poem “Development,” published in *Asolando: Fancies and Facts* (1889). Browning remembers at the age of five asking what his father was reading. To explain the siege of Troy, the elder Browning created a game for the child in which the family pets were assigned roles and furniture was recruited to serve for the besieged city. Later, when the child had incorporated the game into his play with his friends, his father introduced him to Alexander Pope’s translation of the *Iliad*. Browning’s appetite for the story having been whetted, he was induced to learn Greek so as to read the original.

Much of Browning’s education was conducted at home by his father, which accounts for the wide range of unusual information the mature poet brought to his work. His family background was also important for financial reasons; the father whose own artistic and scholarly dreams had been destroyed by financial necessity was more than willing to support his beloved son’s efforts. Browning decided as a child that he wanted to be a poet, and he never seriously attempted any other profession. Both his day-to-day needs and the financial cost of publishing his early poetic efforts were willingly supplied by his parents.

Browning’s early career has been characterized by Ian Jack as a search for an appropriate poetic form, and his first published effort, *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession* (1833), proved in retrospect to be a false start. Browning’s next poetic production, *Paracelsus* (1835), achieved more critical regard and began to move toward the greater objectivity of the dramatic monologue form that Browning perfected over the next several years. Browning also wrote several plays intended for the stage, along with closet dramas; however, he was not suited to be a playwright. His chief theatrical patron, William Macready, was already becoming disillusioned by the plays’ lack of success and the poet’s persistent difficulties in creating theatrical plots.

Before that estrangement, however, the alliance between Browning and Macready had one salutary effect: it provided the occasion for Browning’s composition of “The Pied Piper.” In May 1842 Macready’s son Willie was sick in bed; Willie liked to draw and asked Browning to give him “some little thing to illustrate” while in confinement. The poet responded first with a short poem, “The Cardinal and the Dog,” and then, after being impressed with Willie’s drawings for it, with “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.”
The story of the Pied Piper was evidently well known in Browning’s home. The poet’s father began his own poem on the subject in 1842 for another young family friend, discontinuing his effort when he learned of his son’s poem. The primary source of the story was a seventeenth-century collection, Nathaniel Wanley’s *Wonders of the Little World* (1678). Browning claimed many years later that this was the sole source, but William Clyde DeVane notes that some significant details in Browning’s account, including an erroneous date for the event described, occur in an earlier work, Richard Verstegen’s *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities* (1605), but not in Wanley.

Whatever its sources, “The Pied Piper” reflects the hand of a master storyteller. The poem tells a story of civic venality and retribution. Desperate to rid the city of rats, the corrupt and repulsively corpulent mayor engages the mysterious piper to charm the vermin away; the piper plays a tune that draws the rats from their holes and leads them to the river Weser, where they drown. Only one especially hardy rat escapes death—by swimming across the river—to tell a cautionary tale to other rats; the rat’s story enables Browning to provide an explanation for the piper’s magic, as the rat tells how the sound of the pipe evoked all kinds of wonderful rattish treats:

                                       I heard a sound as of scraping tripe,
                                       And putting apples, wondrous ripe,
                                       In a cider-press’s gripe;
                                       And a moving away of pickle-tub boards,
                                       And a leaving ajar of conserve-cupboards,
                                       And a drawing the corks of train-oil flasks,
                                       And a breaking the hoops of butter-casks.

With the rats destroyed and their nests blocked up, the mayor and corporation of Hamelin feel secure in reneging on their agreement with the piper and refuse to pay him the thousand guilders he demands. Where they had offered fifty times the piper’s requested fee before the rats were eliminated, they now offer only fifty guilders, thinking of all the fine wines they might purchase with the money saved. After all, the mayor claims, the piper cannot restore the rats to life.

The angry piper then blows a new tune and lures the children of Hamelin to follow him—not, this time, to the river but to the Koppelberg, a mountain west of the city, which opens up to swallow all but one, a lame boy who cannot walk fast enough to pass through the opening before it closes. The child, saved by his physical limitations, neatly parallels the rat who survives destruction by its superior fitness and serves a similar function of revealing the secret of the piper’s song, which had promised an idyllic world of play for all who followed.

The Hamelin city officials offer rewards and send searchers in all directions to find the missing children, but to no avail. Browning explains how the story passes into local tradition, illustrated in stained glass and commemorated in all legal memorandums from that day onward. His account also notes, as does the Verstegen source text, the existence of a pocket of Saxons in Slavic Transylvania that may be descended from the lost children of Hamelin and it ends with the moral that people should keep their promises.

“The Pied Piper” has a great deal of charm, and both its theme and its moral reflect the mainstream of Victorian thought. Browning, however, seems to have held the poem in little esteem and reportedly only included it in *Dramatic Lyrics* because of the need for additional verse to fill out the sixteen-page pamphlet. Indeed, this narrative poem does not seem to fit comfortably with the dramatic monologue form of the other poems in the book, which include such widely anthologized pieces as “My Last Duchess” and “Porphyria’s Lover.” While “The Pied Piper” found its own audience and John Forster’s review of *Dramatic Lyrics* in *The Examiner* quoted favorably nearly half the poem, critical attention has usually focused on the other poems in the volume, the shorter dramatic monologues in which Browning finally found the form that would establish him as a major poet of his time and a significant influence on modern poetry.

While “The Pied Piper” differs from most of Browning’s adult poetry, much of its charm and delight derive from the same poetic tools that Browning deployed in his more serious work. However, techniques that are praised in “The Pied Piper” are frequently perceived as defects in the adult poems. Victorian critics disliked his predilection for outrageous (and sometimes unpronounceable) rhymes and the excessive use of single rhymes, as in the vivid account of the rat infestation that opens “The Pied Piper”:

                                            Rats!
                                       They fought the dogs and killed the cats,
                                           And bit the babies in the cradles,
                                       And ate the cheese out of the vats,
                                           And licked the soup from the cooks’ own ladles,
                                       Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
                                           Made nests inside men’s Sunday hats,
                                       And even spoiled the women’s chats.

Earlier critics tended to see Browning’s rhyme patterns as appropriate for light verse such as children’s poems, where the emphasis is on entertainment, but as a defect in adult poetry, with its philosophical or religious concerns. The source of “The Pied Piper” in arcane reference works from past centuries also suggests one of the problems Browning had in achieving an audience for his adult poetry: he was frequently attacked for obscurity in his verse, and much of that obscurity derives from his unreferenced allusions to the vast body of arcana that he had read.

Another narrative poem, “‘How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix,’“ appeared in Browning’s collection of dramatic monologues *Bells and Pomegranates. No. VII.—Dramatic Romances & Lyrics* (1845). While not expressly written for children, this poem was printed separately in a child’s edition after Browning’s death and for many years was commonly included in children’s school texts; it remains popular for its galloping anapestic rhythm and exciting description of a cross-country equestrian race. The poem presents an entirely imaginary seventeenth-century mission to relieve the city of Aix-la-Chapelle in Germany. Three riders are dispatched from Ghent, in Belgium, to carry an important message; two of the riders’ horses fail, and the third, that of the speaker, accomplishes the mission to universal acclaim. What the message is, other than to secure the freedom of the German city, is never stated.

Besides introducing the world to “The Pied Piper” and establishing the poet’s modus operandi for his future verse, *Dramatic Lyrics* also had a lasting effect on Browning’s personal life. Elizabeth Barrett admired the book, and in her 1844 poem “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” she expressed the esteem in which she held Browning by linking him to William Wordsworth and Alfred Tennyson as one of the great poets of the age. She met Browning and the two poets fell deeply in love; unfortunately, Elizabeth’s father, Edward Moulton Barrett, would not countenance any of his children marrying and leaving the home. On 12 September 1846 they were secretly married, and one week later they eloped to the Continent.

Browning wrote relatively little during the marriage, in part because the family frequently moved and, because of Elizabeth’s frail health, he was usually busy making all the arrangements for housing and transportation. The Brownings had one child, Robert Wiedemann Barrett Browning, called “Pen,” born in 1849 (the same year Browning’s mother died). Both parents doted on the boy, and Robert Browning took particular responsibility for his son’s education—yet another diversion from poetic production. The poet who some years earlier had produced a major children’s poem to amuse the son of a friend made no similar creations for his own son, however, but continued to work on longer philosophical poems for an adult audience.

Browning became in his later years that curious phenomenon, the Victorian sage—widely regarded for his knowledge and his explorations of philosophical questions of great resonance in Victorian life. He witnessed the creation (by F.J. Furnivall in 1881) of the Browning Society, dedicated to the study of the poet’s work and thought. Just before his death in 1889, Browning finally published the other poem written for young Willie Macready, “The Cardinal and the Dog.” This fifteen-line poem, like “The Pied Piper,” originated in one of the legends recounted in Wanley’s *Wonders of the Little World*. It tells how Cardinal Crescenzio, a representative of the pope at the Council of Trent, was frightened by the apparition of a large black dog that only he could see, after which he became seriously ill; on his deathbed he again saw the dog. The poem has elicited little critical response and has seldom been anthologized; its interest today lies primarily in its role as a warm-up to “The Pied Piper.”

Anyone as widely adulated as Browning was during the later years of his life is bound to suffer a decline in critical valuation. Along with other Victorians, Browning was dismissed by influential figures among the modernists, including T.S. Eliot (although Ezra Pound paid tribute to Browning as one of his literary fathers). Following World War II, however, Browning’s reputation has been salvaged by a more objective generation of critics who note his poetic failings but also trace his influence on the poetic forms and concerns of his twentieth-century successors. Through all the vicissitudes of critical reputation, however, Browning’s major contribution to the canon of children’s literature, “The Pied Piper of Hamelin,” has retained its popular audience.

The Darkling Thrush

BY [THOMAS HARDY](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/thomas-hardy)

I leant upon a coppice gate

      When Frost was spectre-grey,

And Winter's dregs made desolate

      The weakening eye of day.

The tangled bine-stems scored the sky

      Like strings of broken lyres,

And all mankind that haunted nigh

      Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be

      The Century's corpse outleant,

His crypt the cloudy canopy,

      The wind his death-lament.

The ancient pulse of germ and birth

      Was shrunken hard and dry,

And every spirit upon earth

      Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among

      The bleak twigs overhead

In a full-hearted evensong

      Of joy illimited;

An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,

      In blast-beruffled plume,

Had chosen thus to fling his soul

      Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings

      Of such ecstatic sound

Was written on terrestrial things

      Afar or nigh around,

That I could think there trembled through

      His happy good-night air

Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew

      And I was unaware.

POET[Thomas Hardy](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/thomas-hardy) 1840–1928

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Victorian](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=19)

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HOLIDAYS[New Year](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#holiday=10)

POETIC TERMS[Rhymed Stanza,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)[Common Measure,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=46)[Alliteration,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=38)[Elegy](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=16)

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

BY [T. S. ELIOT](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/t-s-eliot)

*S’io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma percioche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero,
Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table;

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,

The muttering retreats

Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels

And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument

Of insidious intent

To lead you to an overwhelming question ...

Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”

Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go

Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,

The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,

Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,

Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,

Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,

Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,

And seeing that it was a soft October night,

Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time

For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,

Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;

There will be time, there will be time

To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;

There will be time to murder and create,

And time for all the works and days of hands

That lift and drop a question on your plate;

Time for you and time for me,

And time yet for a hundred indecisions,

And for a hundred visions and revisions,

Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go

Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time

To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”

Time to turn back and descend the stair,

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —

(They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”)

My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —

(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:

Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;

I know the voices dying with a dying fall

Beneath the music from a farther room.

               So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,

When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,

Then how should I begin

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

               And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—

Arms that are braceleted and white and bare

(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)

Is it perfume from a dress

That makes me so digress?

Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.

               And should I then presume?

               And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets

And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes

Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...

I should have been a pair of ragged claws

Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!

Smoothed by long fingers,

Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,

Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,

Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,

Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,

I am no prophet — and here’s no great matter;

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,

And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,

And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,

After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,

Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,

Would it have been worth while,

To have bitten off the matter with a smile,

To have squeezed the universe into a ball

To roll it towards some overwhelming question,

To say: “I am Lazarus, come from the dead,

Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all”—

If one, settling a pillow by her head

               Should say: “That is not what I meant at all;

               That is not it, at all.”

And would it have been worth it, after all,

Would it have been worth while,

After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,

After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—

And this, and so much more?—

It is impossible to say just what I mean!

But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:

Would it have been worth while

If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,

And turning toward the window, should say:

               “That is not it at all,

               That is not what I meant, at all.”

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;

Am an attendant lord, one that will do

To swell a progress, start a scene or two,

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

Deferential, glad to be of use,

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;

Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;

At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—

Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind?   Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves

Combing the white hair of the waves blown back

When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea

By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown

Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

### POEM CATEGORIZATION

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POETIC TERMS[Mixed,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=47)[Allusion,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=39)[Dramatic Monologue,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=15)[Refrain,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=43)[Persona](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=60)

The Waste Land

BY [T. S. ELIOT](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/t-s-eliot)

                                  FOR EZRA POUND
*IL MIGLIOR FABBRO*

             *I. The Burial of the Dead*

  April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

Winter kept us warm, covering

Earth in forgetful snow, feeding

A little life with dried tubers.

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee

With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,

And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,

And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.

Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.

And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke’s,

My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,

And I was frightened. He said, Marie,

Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.

In the mountains, there you feel free.

I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

  What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water. Only

There is shadow under this red rock,

(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),

And I will show you something different from either

Your shadow at morning striding behind you

Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

*Frisch weht der Wind*

*Der Heimat zu*

*Mein Irisch Kind,*

*Wo weilest du?*

“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;

“They called me the hyacinth girl.”

—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither

Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,

Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

*Oed’ und leer das Meer*.

  Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,

Had a bad cold, nevertheless

Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,

With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,

Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,

(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)

Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,

The lady of situations.

Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,

And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,

Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,

Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find

The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.

I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.

Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,

Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:

One must be so careful these days.

  Unreal City,

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,

To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours

With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: “Stetson!

“You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!

“That corpse you planted last year in your garden,

“Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

“Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

“Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men,

“Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!

“You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!”

             *II. A Game of Chess*

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,

Glowed on the marble, where the glass

Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines

From which a golden Cupidon peeped out

(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)

Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra

Reflecting light upon the table as

The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,

From satin cases poured in rich profusion;

In vials of ivory and coloured glass

Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,

Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused

And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air

That freshened from the window, these ascended

In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,

Flung their smoke into the laquearia,

Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.

Huge sea-wood fed with copper

Burned green and orange, framed by the coloured stone,

In which sad light a carvéd dolphin swam.

Above the antique mantel was displayed

As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene

The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king

So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale

Filled all the desert with inviolable voice

And still she cried, and still the world pursues,

“Jug Jug” to dirty ears.

And other withered stumps of time

Were told upon the walls; staring forms

Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.

Footsteps shuffled on the stair.

Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair

Spread out in fiery points

Glowed into words, then would be savagely still.

  “My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

“Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

  “What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

“I never know what you are thinking. Think.”

  I think we are in rats’ alley

Where the dead men lost their bones.

  “What is that noise?”

                          The wind under the door.

“What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?”

                           Nothing again nothing.

                                                        “Do

“You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

“Nothing?”

       I remember

Those are pearls that were his eyes.

“Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?”

                                                                           But

O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—

It’s so elegant

So intelligent

“What shall I do now? What shall I do?”

“I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street

“With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?

“What shall we ever do?”

                                               The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

  When Lil’s husband got demobbed, I said—

I didn’t mince my words, I said to her myself,

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart.

He’ll want to know what you done with that money he gave you

To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.

You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,

He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you.

And no more can’t I, I said, and think of poor Albert,

He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time,

And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will, I said.

Oh is there, she said. Something o’ that, I said.

Then I’ll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look.

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

If you don’t like it you can get on with it, I said.

Others can pick and choose if you can’t.

But if Albert makes off, it won’t be for lack of telling.

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.

(And her only thirty-one.)

I can’t help it, she said, pulling a long face,

It’s them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.

(She’s had five already, and nearly died of young George.)

The chemist said it would be all right, but I’ve never been the same.

You *are* a proper fool, I said.

Well, if Albert won’t leave you alone, there it is, I said,

What you get married for if you don’t want children?

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Well, that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot gammon,

And they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it hot—

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.

Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.

              *III. The Fire Sermon*

  The river’s tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf

Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind

Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,

Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends

Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.

And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;

Departed, have left no addresses.

By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . .

Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,

Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.

But at my back in a cold blast I hear

The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

A rat crept softly through the vegetation

Dragging its slimy belly on the bank

While I was fishing in the dull canal

On a winter evening round behind the gashouse

Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck

And on the king my father’s death before him.

White bodies naked on the low damp ground

And bones cast in a little low dry garret,

Rattled by the rat’s foot only, year to year.

But at my back from time to time I hear

The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring

Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.

O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter

And on her daughter

They wash their feet in soda water

*Et O ces voix d’enfants, chantant dans la coupole!*

Twit twit twit

Jug jug jug jug jug jug

So rudely forc’d.

Tereu

Unreal City

Under the brown fog of a winter noon

Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant

Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants

C.i.f. London: documents at sight,

Asked me in demotic French

To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel

Followed by a weekend at the Metropole.

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back

Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits

Like a taxi throbbing waiting,

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,

Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see

At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives

Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights

Her stove, and lays out food in tins.

Out of the window perilously spread

Her drying combinations touched by the sun’s last rays,

On the divan are piled (at night her bed)

Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.

I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs

Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—

I too awaited the expected guest.

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,

A small house agent’s clerk, with one bold stare,

One of the low on whom assurance sits

As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,

The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,

Endeavours to engage her in caresses

Which still are unreproved, if undesired.

Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;

Exploring hands encounter no defence;

His vanity requires no response,

And makes a welcome of indifference.

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all

Enacted on this same divan or bed;

I who have sat by Thebes below the wall

And walked among the lowest of the dead.)

Bestows one final patronising kiss,

And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit . . .

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,

Hardly aware of her departed lover;

Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:

“Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.”

When lovely woman stoops to folly and

Paces about her room again, alone,

She smoothes her hair with automatic hand,

And puts a record on the gramophone.

“This music crept by me upon the waters”

And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.

O City city, I can sometimes hear

Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,

The pleasant whining of a mandoline

And a clatter and a chatter from within

Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls

Of Magnus Martyr hold

Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.

               The river sweats

               Oil and tar

               The barges drift

               With the turning tide

               Red sails

               Wide

               To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.

               The barges wash

               Drifting logs

               Down Greenwich reach

               Past the Isle of Dogs.

                                 Weialala leia

                                 Wallala leialala

               Elizabeth and Leicester

               Beating oars

               The stern was formed

               A gilded shell

               Red and gold

               The brisk swell

               Rippled both shores

               Southwest wind

               Carried down stream

               The peal of bells

               White towers

                                Weialala leia

                                Wallala leialala

“Trams and dusty trees.

Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew

Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees

Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe.”

“My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart

Under my feet. After the event

He wept. He promised a ‘new start.’

I made no comment. What should I resent?”

“On Margate Sands.

I can connect

Nothing with nothing.

The broken fingernails of dirty hands.

My people humble people who expect

Nothing.”

                       la la

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

O Lord Thou pluckest me out

O Lord Thou pluckest

burning

             *IV. Death by Water*

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,

Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell

And the profit and loss.

                                   A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell

He passed the stages of his age and youth

Entering the whirlpool.

                                   Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,

Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

              *V. What the Thunder Said*

  After the torchlight red on sweaty faces

After the frosty silence in the gardens

After the agony in stony places

The shouting and the crying

Prison and palace and reverberation

Of thunder of spring over distant mountains

He who was living is now dead

We who were living are now dying

With a little patience

Here is no water but only rock

Rock and no water and the sandy road

The road winding above among the mountains

Which are mountains of rock without water

If there were water we should stop and drink

Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think

Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand

If there were only water amongst the rock

Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit

Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit

There is not even silence in the mountains

But dry sterile thunder without rain

There is not even solitude in the mountains

But red sullen faces sneer and snarl

From doors of mudcracked houses

                                      If there were water

   And no rock

   If there were rock

   And also water

   And water

   A spring

   A pool among the rock

   If there were the sound of water only

   Not the cicada

   And dry grass singing

   But sound of water over a rock

   Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees

   Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop

   But there is no water

Who is the third who walks always beside you?

When I count, there are only you and I together

But when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you

Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded

I do not know whether a man or a woman

—But who is that on the other side of you?

What is that sound high in the air

Murmur of maternal lamentation

Who are those hooded hordes swarming

Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth

Ringed by the flat horizon only

What is the city over the mountains

Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air

Falling towers

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

Vienna London

Unreal

A woman drew her long black hair out tight

And fiddled whisper music on those strings

And bats with baby faces in the violet light

Whistled, and beat their wings

And crawled head downward down a blackened wall

And upside down in air were towers

Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours

And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.

In this decayed hole among the mountains

In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing

Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel

There is the empty chapel, only the wind’s home.

It has no windows, and the door swings,

Dry bones can harm no one.

Only a cock stood on the rooftree

Co co rico co co rico

In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust

Bringing rain

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves

Waited for rain, while the black clouds

Gathered far distant, over Himavant.

The jungle crouched, humped in silence.

Then spoke the thunder

DA

*Datta:* what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment’s surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract

By this, and this only, we have existed

Which is not to be found in our obituaries

Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider

Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor

In our empty rooms

DA

*Dayadhvam:* I have heard the key

Turn in the door once and turn once only

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours

Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus

DA

*Damyata:* The boat responded

Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar

The sea was calm, your heart would have responded

Gaily, when invited, beating obedient

To controlling hands

                                    I sat upon the shore

Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

Shall I at least set my lands in order?

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

*Poi s’ascose nel foco che gli affina*

*Quando fiam uti chelidon*—O swallow swallow

*Le Prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie*

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo’s mad againe.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

                  Shantih     shantih     shantih

POET[T. S. Eliot](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/t-s-eliot) 1888–1965

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

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T. S. Eliot

1888–1965



When T. S. Eliot died, wrote Robert Giroux, "the world became a lesser place." Certainly the most imposing poet of his time, Eliot was revered by Igor Stravinsky "not only as a great sorcerer of words but as the very key keeper of the language." For Alfred Kazin he was "the*mana* known as 'T. S. Eliot,' the model poet of our time, the most cited poet and incarnation of literary correctness in the English-speaking world." Northrop Frye simply states: "A thorough knowledge of Eliot is compulsory for anyone interested in contemporary literature. Whether he is liked or disliked is of no importance, but he must be read."

In 1945 Eliot wrote: "A poet must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him." Correlatively, the duty of the poet, as Eliot emphasized in a 1943 lecture, "is only indirectly to the people: his direct duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve." Thus he dismisses the so-called "social function" of poetry. The only "method," Eliot once wrote, is "to be very intelligent." As a result, his poetry "has all the advantages of a highly critical habit of mind," writes A. Alvarez; "there is a coolness in the midst of involvement; he uses texts exactly for his own purpose; he is not carried away. Hence the completeness and inviolability of the poems. What he does in them can be taken no further.... [One gets] the impression that anything he turned his attention to he would perform with equal distinction." Alvarez believes that "the strength of Eliot's intelligence lies in its training; it is the product of a perfectly orthodox academic education." But Jacques Maritain once told Marshall McLuhan that "Eliot knows so much philosophy and theology that I do not see how he can write poetry at all." Eliot, however, never recognized a conflict between academic and creative pursuits.

Of his early work, Eliot has said: "The form in which I began to write, in 1908 or 1909, was directly drawn from the study of Laforgue together with the later Elizabethan drama; and I do not know anyone who started from exactly that point." Elsewhere he said: "The kind of poetry that I needed, to teach me the use of my own voice, did not exist in English at all; it was only found in French," and Leonard Unger concludes that, "insofar as Eliot started from an *exact point,* it was exclusively and emphatically the poetry of Laforgue." To a lesser extent, he was influenced by other Symbolists, by the metaphysical poets, by Donne, Dryden, and Dante. "His appreciation of Shakespeare," writes Sir Herbert Read, "was subject to his moral or religious scruples." With [Samuel Johnson](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=3522), whom, according to Sir Herbert, Eliot "honoured above all other English writers," he shared "a faith in God and the fear of death."

In *After Strange Gods* Eliot wrote: "I should say that in one's prose reflections one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse one can deal only with actuality." From this Cleanth Brooks elaborates: "Poetry is the medium *par excellence* for rendering a total situation—for letting us know what it feels like to take a particular action or hold a particular belief or simply to look at something with imaginative sympathy." Brook's explains that it is Eliot's notion that the poet is thus "committed 'to turn the unpoetical into poetry' [and to fuse] 'the matter-of-fact and the fantastic.'" But the meaning of "reality," for Eliot, is especial, existing always "at the edge of nothingness," where, as B. Rajan writes, "the birth of meaning ... takes place in a manner both creative and ancient. Poetry cannot report the event; it must *be*the event, lived through in a form that can speak about itself while remaining wholly itself. This is a feat at least as difficult as it sounds, and if the poem succeeds in it, it is because, however much it remembers previous deaths by drowning, it creates its own life against its own thrust of questioning."

"In effect," writes Herbert Howarth, "Eliot demonstrated that a poet's business is not just reporting feeling, but extending feeling, and creating a shape to convey it." Eliot's poetry, then, is a process of "living by thought," says Rajan, "of seeking to find peace 'through a satisfaction of the whole being.' It is singular in its realization of passion through intelligence. It is driven by a scepticism which resolutely asks the question but refuses to stop short at it, by a sensibility sharply aware of 'the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering.' If it attains a world of belief or a conviction of order, that conviction is won against the attacking strength of doubt and remains always subject to its corrosive power. Not all of us share Eliot's faith. But all of us can accept the poetry because nearly every line of it was written while looking into the eyes of the demon."

In 1921 [Conrad Aiken](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=61), although a life-long friend and admirer of Eliot, not only could not share Eliot's faith, but further questioned the validity of the poetry as poetry. "His sense of the definite is intermittent," Aiken wrote; "it abandons him often at the most critical moment, and in consequence Mr. Eliot himself is forever abandoning *us* on the very doorstep of the illuminating. One has again and again the feeling that he is working, as it were, too close to the object.... He passes quickly from one detail of analysis to another; he is aggressively aware that he is 'thinking,' his brow is knit; but he appears to believe that mere fineness of detail will constitute, in the sequence of his comments, a direction. What happens is that he achieves a kind of filigree without pattern."

But Alvarez, who calls Eliot "a supreme interpreter of meditated experience," provides perhaps the most lucid analysis of Eliot's "method." "The moments of greatest intensity have, as Eliot presents them, a certain obliqueness, an allusiveness, a controlling detachment," writes Alvarez. "It is a poetry apart.... He is, in some ways, a meditative poet. But this does not mean a poet who deals in abstractions; Eliot's meditations are meditations on experience, in which the abstractions belong as much as the images; they are all a part of his particular cast of mind, the meaning he gives to past experience. But Eliot is, I think, a relatively indifferent, or uninterested, observer of the phenomenal world.... His direct affirmations are always summings-up of this style, concentrations for which the rest of his verse appears as so many hints."

Aiken's "filigree without pattern" may then be seen as Unger's "magic lantern," which throws "the nerves in patterns on a screen." Citing *"Prufrock,"*Unger compares Eliot's poetry to a series of slides. "Each slide is an isolated, fragmentary image, producing its own effect, including suggestions of some larger action or situation of which it is but an arrested moment." Richard Poirier explains that these "procedural hesitancies," as a characteristic of form, "have the total effect of enormous stamina; [Eliot's] reluctance of self-assertion, by acknowledging all the possibilities open to it, emerges as an ever dangerously controlled strength." Poirier continues: "In Eliot the form is shaped by creative and de-creative movements: each movement is in itself usually very tentative, and yet each achieves by cumulative interaction a firmness that supports the other. The result is an extraordinary fusion of diffidence and dogmatism." And it is by this fusion that "the poet's experiences," says Frye, "are shaped into a unity which takes its place in a literary tradition." By being assimilated into a tradition (of which Eliot was always sharply aware), then, genuine poetry does contribute, as G. Wilson Knight notes, "to the health of a culture," in that it "tells us the truth about ourselves in our present situation ... is capable of dealing with the present world, [and] does not have to leave out the boredom and the horror of our world in order to discern its true glory." And it is just here, by creating such a poetry, that Eliot made his greatest gift to poetry. "No poet has been so deeply honest," says Knight, and A. R. Scott-James adds: "He excels by introducing us to our own generation." McLuhan summarizes: "To purify the 'dialect of the tribe' and to open the doors of perception by discovering a host of new poetic themes and rhythms was the especial achievement of T. S. Eliot. He gave us back our language enlivened and refreshed by new contacts with many other tongues."

Certainly one of the most important ways in which Eliot fulfilled his self-imposed duty to his own voice was by using the materials of the city for building his poetry. Potter Woodbery writes that "the modern poet, as Eliot himself on occasions has pointed out, finds himself faced with the task of revitalizing a language that has gone dead, of seeking out genuine but novel avenues of expression so that a sharpness of impact can once again be felt in English poetry.... The fresh vitality that the materials of the city give to these modern metaphors and similes makes them unusually arresting with the result that one finds himself drawn into a fuller and closer examination of their poetic meaning rather than gliding over them as is the tendency in the case of the more traditional 'poetic' figures." The city, for Eliot, further serves as "the one great artifact of secularized Enlightenment man"; it stands as a "monument to humanity and testifies to the absence of God in the modern world." But, as Woodbery quickly adds, "because the city presents itself throughout his poetry in a consistently dark light, one should not infer on Eliot's part a naive primitivistic longing for a restoration of the non-urban modes of life characteristic of the preindustrial world. Eliot's indictment of the present age is spiritual rather than sociological." Similarly Eliot believes that the primary value of religion, for mankind, lies "in the quality of its worldliness," in the context of a social institution (although [Stephen Spender](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=6465) reports that Eliot once told him that religion "is a less effective escape than that used by thousands who 'escape by reading novels, looking at films, or best of all, by driving very fast on land or in air, which makes even dreams unnecessary.'") Religion is most effective as a device, then, but cannot even work as well as other devices.

Frye writes: "The particular continuum into which an individual is born, Eliot calls his culture or tradition. By culture Eliot means 'that which makes life worth living': one's total way of life, including art and education, but also cooking and sports. By tradition, also, Eliot means both a conscious and an unconscious life in a social continuum.... He speaks of culture metaphorically as the 'incarnation' of a religion, the human manifestation of a superhuman reality. A culture's religion 'should mean for the individual and for the group something toward which they strive, not merely something which they possess.'" (It is tangentially interesting to apply Eliot's definition of culture as a continuum—in which the upper class possesses not more culture, but a more conscious culture—to his own readership. His popular reputation, Frye writes, "was that of an erudite highbrow. But such a reputation would be contradictory to Eliot's view of the 'elite' as responsible for articulating the unconscious culture of their societies. Eliot would like, he says, an audience that could neither read nor write." As Geoffrey Dearmer adds sympathetically, "poor Eliot has become a subject for university schools and a burden on those in pursuit of degrees when all that he asked of readers was to be read with enjoyment.") "All views of life that Eliot would call serious or mature," Frye concludes, "distinguish between two selves in man: the selfish and the self-respecting. These are not only distinguishable but opposed, and in Christianity the opposition is total, as for it the selfish self is to be annihilated, and the other is the immortal soul one is trying to save. Theories of conduct exalting the freedom of the personality or character without making this distinction are disastrous."

Like Emerson, then, Eliot recognized the duality of man's soul "struggling," as Kazin writes, "for its own salvation"—and the world, "meaning everything outside the soul's anxious efforts," so that this duality is more "real" than society. Just as Eliot never accepted the statement that *The Waste Land* represented "the disillusionment of a generation," Braybrooke submits, he would never admit that his use of broken images "meant a separation from belief, since for him doubts and certainties represented varieties of belief." As Knight astutely points out, the "wonderful lyric in *East Coker*[beginning] 'The wounded surgeon plies the steel' [is] surely the grimmest statement on the Christian world-view ever penned by a devotee [and] offers a universe so riddled with negations and agonies that we must go to the anti-Christian polemics of Nietzsche—which its cutting phraseology recalls—for an analogy." But as always, Eliot is applying to the city and to the institutions of men his own peculiar vision in order to make a poetry which he in turn uses to test the validity of poetry. There is no deceit; from the outset he tells us that he will take us through half-deserted streets "that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent / To lead you to an overwhelming question." Eliot presents us with a pattern which, as Frank Kermode writes in his discussion of *The Waste Land,* "suggests a commitment, a religion; and the poet retreats to it. But the poem is a great poem because it will not force us to follow him. It makes us wiser without committing us.... It joins the mix of our own minds but it does not tell us what to believe.... The poem resists an imposed order; it is a part of its greatness that it can do so."

Scott-James, in his analysis of the poetry, is able to tell us what is not to be found in Eliot. "There is no joy, no exultation, not even pleasure except the pleasure which is shown as spurious. There is no portrayal of common emotions, except when they are depraved, or silly. All the things which common men think of as practical and desirable vanish into insignificance under his vision." And Wallace Fowlie tells us what can be discovered there: "More fervently than any other poet of the twentieth century, Eliot has sung of the permanence of time, the experience of one time which is all time. He sings of it when he speaks of the flower that fades, of the sea that seems eternal, of the rock in the sea, and of the prayer of the Annunciation.... In such [passages] the poet reveals his true mission, that of transmuting his intimate emotions, his personal anguish, into a strange and impersonal work. In this way, the poet becomes aware of his presence in the world, where his major victory is the imposing of his presence as a man by means of his lucidity and his creative power."

Eliot told [Donald Hall](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=2853) in 1959 that he considered *The Four Quartets*to be his best work; "and," he added, "I'd like to feel that they get better as they go on. The second is better than the first, the third is better than the second, and the fourth is the best of all. At any rate, that's the way I flatter myself." Neville Braybrooke writes: "It is ... generally agreed ... that in his *Four Quartets* [Eliot] attempted ... to achieve a poetry so transparent that in concentrating on it attention would not fall so much on the words, but on the words pointed to. And in his rigorous stripping away of the poetic, such a pure poetry is sustained." Further, Eliot shaped the *Quartets* into a gyre, and, by imposing such a form, directed us to see the work as a totality in which each part contributes to and is enhanced by the process of synthesis.

Although many critics have commented on the cyclical nature of the *Four Quartets,*Frye has actually diagrammed these poems. "Draw a horizontal line on a page," he says, "then a vertical line of the same length cutting it in two and forming a cross, then a circle of which these lines are diameters, then a smaller circle inside with the same centre. The horizontal line is clock time, the Heraclitean flux, the river into which no one steps twice. The vertical line is the presence of God descending into time, and crossing it at the Incarnation, forming the 'still point of the turning world.' The top and bottom of the vertical line represent the goals of the way up and the way down, though we cannot show that they are the same point in two dimensions. The top and bottom halves of the larger circle are the visions of plenitude and of vacancy respectively; the top and bottom halves of the smaller circle are the world of the rose-garden and (not unnaturally for an inner circle) of the subway, innocence and experience.... What lies below experience is ascesis or dark night. There is thus no hell in *Four Quartets,*which belong entirely to the purgatorial vision." "The archetype of this cycle is the Bible," he continues, "which begins with the story of man in a garden." So in Eliot we begin and end at the same point, "with the Word as the circumference of reality, containing within itself time, space, and poetry viewed in the light of the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written." All this to say, as Alvarez writes, that "the triumphant achievement of the *Four Quartets*is in the peculiar wholeness and isolation of their poetic world.... Eliot has always worked obliquely, by suggestion and by his penetrating personal rhythms. His power is in his sureness and mastery of subject and expression. And this sense of inviolable purpose seems to remove his verse from the ordinary realm of human interchange. He has created a world of formal perfection. It lacks the dimension of human error."

Carol H. Smith writes: "Just as a religious interpretation of existence was needed to order the world of nature and of man, so art, [Eliot] felt, required a form which could impose order and meaning on experience. The form which Eliot came to see as the most perfectly ordered and most complete as a microcosmic creation of experience was drama." In the *Aims of Poetic Drama* Eliot wrote: "What I should like to do is this: that the people on the stage should seem to the audience so like themselves that they would find themselves thinking: 'I could talk in poetry too!' Then they are not transported into an unaccustomed, artificial world; but their ordinary, sordid world is suddenly illuminated and transfigured. And if poetry cannot do that for people, it is merely superfluous decoration." But for many, accustomed to the conventions of modern theater, Eliot was not a successful dramatist. As Miss Smith writes: "The plays of T. S. Eliot are more likely to baffle than to inspire. Not only do Eliot's plays refuse to conform to today's dramatic modes but each play is theatrically different from the others." And John Gross explains that, "having arrived in the *Quartets* at a state of mind so specialised as to be barely communicable, Eliot went on to devote what remained of his energy to the most unashamedly public of poetic activities, writing for the theater. Was it a mistake? In all probability, yes. Certainly at his death Eliot's standing as a poet was secure, while his reputation as a dramatist was in the trough of the wave." But, says Knight, "how much more illuminating is Eliot's failure than the successes of lesser poets!"

That Eliot's intentions as a playwright were serious can hardly be questioned. Miss Smith writes: "Eliot's interest in drama dates back to the beginnings of his career. His critical essays on Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, his use of the dramatic monologue in some of his best-known early poems ... and the dramatic contrasts of episodes in *The Waste Land* all testify to what Edmund Wilson called 'the dramatic character of his imagination.'" Eliot himself told Donald Hall that, in writing *The Confidential Clerk,*he "wanted to get to learn the technique of the theater so well that I could then forget about it. I always feel it's not wise to violate rules until you know how to observe them." As a result of his conscientiousness, he said, the play "was so well constructed in some ways that people thought it was just meant to be a farce." He told Lawrence Durrell: "If I am writing a play I think I am better concerned with becoming conscious of how to do it rather than in becoming conscious of what I am trying to do." But Eliot later told Hall: "In 1939, if there hadn't been a war, I would probably have tried to write another play. And I think it's a very good thing I didn't have the opportunity. From my personal point of view, the one good thing the war did was to prevent me from writing another play too soon."

"Eliot's desire," writes Miss Smith, "was for a dramatic form which would make drama conform to the criterion of all art: the harmonious relationship of the parts to the whole." And, she continues, "Eliot's ideal of dramatic form was a work which would re-create in its theme, its form and its language the harmony which explained the untidy surface of life. The dramatist's mission was thus both artistic and religious, and it was envisioned as a process of transformation." In 1949, Eliot wrote in a letter to Lawrence Durrell: "We have got to make plays in which the mental movements cannot find physical equivalents. But when one comes to the big moment (and if we can't get it we can't do drama) there must be some simple fundamental emotion (expressed, of course, in deathless verse) which *everybody* can understand."

Eliot chose *poetic* drama, as McLuhan explains, because it is within this kind of play that "the participation of the audience in the action is achieved both poetically and liturgically. It was Eliot's discovery that prose drama isolates the audience from the action of the play. Poetic drama that makes a skillful use of contemporary idiom can be a means of involving the audience centrally in the action once more." He labored to "maintain the supremacy of reason" in the plays, and succeeded, Howarth writes, in that "his audience feels the constant presence of an ordering intelligence." It is, however, the very erudition governing the writing that is frequently cited as the major dramatic flaw in the plays. For centuries drama has depended upon the Dionysian properties which Eliot's dramatic theories reject in favor of "reason." Frederick Lumley writes: "Eliot was a conservative, too consciously a critic to wander an inch from the theories of drama he so carefully propounded beforehand. The best criticism of Eliot's plays has been written by Eliot himself, and few theoreticians have proved their views so convincingly in practice. Eliot, a great poet, became both master and pupil of dramatic theory, yet however important his plays were, he was never to write a *chef-d'oeuvre.*His best play, *Murder in the Cathedral,* is noble in its theme and treatment, but lacks the natural abundance of creative genius. His cold, austere intellectuality is apparent in all his plays, and the more his plays have moved from spiritual to secular, the more onerous this has become in making his plays acceptable." But perhaps the statement most frequently trotted out by those unsympathetic to Eliot as dramatist is simply that he wrote verse plays that were social caricatures. Miss Gardner answers thus: "I cannot take very seriously a criticism that assumes that what is temporarily unfashionable is permanently out-of-date. The tradition of social comedy which Eliot took up is a very tough tradition. At the moment these plays are dated, but as they recede into history their social verisimilitude will be as much a source of strength as is the social truth of Restoration Comedy."

Eliot himself believed that *The Family Reunion,* at least poetically, was the best of all his plays. Helen Gardner, among several others, believes that *The Cocktail Party* and*The Confidential Clerk* are his finest. Miss Gardner says of these plays: "No other plays of our generation present with equal force, sympathy, wisdom, and wit the classic subject of comedy: our almost, but mercifully not wholly, unlimited powers of self-deception, and the shocks and surprises that life gives to our poses and pretenses." But history will almost certainly endow *Murder in the Cathedral* with the longest life and the greatest fame. John Gross notes: "Whether or not *Murder in the Cathedral*augments our ability to live, it is certainly a remarkable piece of work. It is Eliot's one indubitable theatrical triumph, and the one English addition to the classic repertoire since Shaw."

Stephen Spender has said of Eliot: "He was more inimitable than any other modern poet ... yet more could be learned from his theory and practice than from any other writer. This man who seemed so unapproachable was the most approached by younger poets—and the most helpful to them—of any poet of his generation," except for [Ezra Pound](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=80585). Certainly it was because he was willing to explicate, and thus to share, the principles by which he worked and lived that he became a great critic. Carlo Linati, one of the first in Italy to write about Eliot, found his poetry "irrational, incomprehensible." But, he added, "because Eliot is first of all a critic, literary criticism is the field in which his personality has found its full expression." Mario Praz notes that, "in the *Partisan Review* for February, 1949, when Eliot's career was nearly concluded, [Delmore Schwartz](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=6099) expressed this opinion: 'When we think of the character of literary dictators in the past, it is easy to see that since 1922, at least, Eliot has occupied a position in the English-speaking world analogous to that occupied by [Ben Jonson](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=3567), Dryden, Pope, Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, and [Matthew Arnold](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=222). It is noticeable that each of these dictators has been a critic as well as a poet, and we may infer from this the fact that it is necessary for them to practice both poetry and criticism.' And the eminent historian of criticism Rene Wellek wrote in The *Sewanee Review* for July, 1956: 'T. S. Eliot is by far the most important critic of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world.'"

Grant T. Webster states that "it is an error in tone and taste to treat [Eliot] as a systematic thinker, as a builder of a critical system" because Eliot himself, dividing criticism into "essays of generalization" and "appreciations of individual authors," came to abandon the former in favor of the latter which, he said, "seem to me to have the best chance of retaining some value for future readers." Praz writes: "Eliot ..., with a typical Anglo-Saxon shyness, has waived any claim to systematic philosophical thought, in statements like the following: 'I have no general theory of my own.... The extreme of theorizing about the nature of poetry, the essence of poetry if there is any, belongs to the study of aesthetics and is no concern of the poet or of a critic with my limited qualifications.'"

Eliot's concern for the lasting value of his (or any) criticism is paralleled by his own awareness of those who preceded him. As John Paul Pritchard explains: "Eliot required that for the understanding of any living artist he be set for contrast and comparison among those dead artists" before him; and "the poet's contribution is not that in which he differs from tradition, but that part of his work most in harmony with the dead poets who preceded him. From these premises Eliot concluded that the poet's work must be judged by standards from the past." And since, as Poirier suggests, he "chooses to devalue literature in the interests of the pre-eminent values of language," Eliot is again led to a poetry which primarily serves the language as it has been invested with life *by tradition.* But, Praz points out, "the critic's task should be to see literature '*not* as consecrated by time, but to see it beyond time; to see the best work of our time and the best work of twenty-five hundred years ago with the same eyes.'" In other words, the poetry itself "does not matter" for Eliot in this sense; as he told Durrell, the "prose sense comes first, and ... poetry is merely prose developed by a knowledge of aeronautics."

Eliot's type of criticism, writes Praz, "in his own words, is meant to be an integration of scholarly criticism. In *The Music of Poetry* he said that his method was that of a poet 'always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing.'" Since Eliot wanted to write poetry "with the greatest economy of words, and with the greatest austerity in the use of metaphor, simile, verbal beauty, and elegance," he turned to Dante, whose language, says Praz, "is the perfection of a common language." Also, Praz continues, "what Eliot [saw] in Dante—who is almost the sole poet for whom he [had] kept up a constant cult—is more the fruit of a poet's sensibility than of a critical evaluation. He [saw] in Dante clear visual images [and] a concise and luminous language." Thus, in establishing criteria for his own poetry, Eliot formalized critical "theories" useful to his own thinking. The resultant eclecticism is, according to Austin Warren, a theory of poetry which "falls neither into didacticism nor into its opposite heresies, imagism and echolalia. The real 'purity' of poetry—to speak in terms at once paradoxical and generic—is to be constantly and richly impure: neither philosophy, nor psychology, nor imagery, nor music alone, but a significant tension between all of them."

Certainly among the most celebrated of Eliot's critical statements are his terms "objective correlative" and "dissociation of sensibility." The former, Praz explains, is Eliot's term for "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion," which is to be expressed "in the form of art." The latter term, writes Pritchard, was used by Eliot "to indicate [an] inability to 'devour any kind of experience.'" Frank Kermode defines Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" as "an historical theory to explain the dearth of objective correlatives in a time when the artist, alienated from his environment ... is working at the beginning of a dark age 'under conditions that seem unpropitious,' in an everworsening climate of imagination."

Regardless of his imposing stature as a literary critic, Eliot, in his later years, seemed to re-examine his earlier statements with mistrust. Eliot told Donald Hall in 1959 that, "as one gets older, one is not quite confident in one's ability to distinguish new genius among younger men." Perhaps the same diminishing confidence in his critical ability led to the various recantations (most notable in his Milton criticism) which characterized much of his later work. I. A. Richards writes: "Gentleness and justness, these are the marks of his later criticism, with its elaborate measures taken to repair any injustices—to Milton, to Shelley, to Coleridge, or to *meaning* or to *interpretation*or even to *education*—that his earlier pronouncements seemed to him to have committed. I doubt if another critic can be found so ready to amend what he had come to consider his own former aberrations." (Conrad Aiken recently quoted from a very early letter in which Eliot called Ezra Pound's poetry "touchingly incompetent." When Hall asked him about this evaluation Eliot replied, "Hah! That was a bit brash, wasn't it?") Richards continues: "These reversals and recantations strike me as springing from an everdeepening scepticism, a questioning of the very roots of critical pretensions. It is as though, in the course of acquiring the tremendous authority that the editor of *The Criterion* came to enjoy, TSE had learned too much about the game of opinion-forming and had become alarmed and indeed irked by the weight his judgments were being accorded. He was no longer amused by the reverence with which they were received."

In his excellent summary of Eliot's critical stance, Alvarez writes: "Our interest and standards in literature are Eliot's creation. And of course this is something more profound than the enthusiasm aroused by a few well-timed articles. His critical pronouncements were made valid by his poetry. So he did more than change the standards of critical judgment; he altered the whole mode of expression in order to make room for his originality."

A review of Eliot's lectures, only recently published in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry: The Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926, and the Turnbull Lectures at the Johns Hopkins University, 1933,* reveals that Eliot "repeatedly cannibalized" them for "subsequent essays," as Helen Vendler notes in *The New Republic.* "And many of their seminal ideas—from the decline of culture since the thirteenth century to a consequent 'dissociation of sensibility' (as intellect detached itself from emotion)—made their way rapidly into critical discourse." Vendler remarks on the profound influence Eliot's ideas had on other critics. "Eliot's writings were always so fertile in suggestion, that cultural critics, religious writers, poets and professors all mined them as sources of provocative obiter dicta."

The lectures themselves are somewhat scattered, written "hurriedly" and during a time of great personal distress for Eliot—his marriage to his wife Vivienne was ending (the relationship later became the subject of a film, *Tom and Viv*) and he was about to convert to the Anglican Church. "And so it isn't surprising," finds Alexander Theroux in the Chicago *Tribune Books,* "to note Eliot's compulsion in the Clark Lectures to put something in order, to seek some sort of wholeness, cultural if not personal." Theroux continues, "The lectures were fulsome scholarship and far from easy to grasp." Robert Craft, writing for *Washington Post Book World,* states, "In general, Eliot's lectures are less finely concentrated than his essays." To assist readers, the editor, Ronald Schuchard, clarified and corrected Eliot's notes and pointed out themes reused by Eliot elsewhere. However, Eric Griffith pronounces in the *Times Literary Supplement,*"They make uncomfortable reading, and may be supposed to have made uncomfortable listening in the black and gold splendour of the hall at Trinity, overlooked as it is by the dominating, narrowed gaze of Henry VIII, who had a shorter way with marital dissatisfactions." Theroux notes the lectures received mixed reviews in their day and concedes, "Even upon reading, there is a pithiness wanting, much needless erudition and unintentional obfuscation." However, he concludes, "there is nothing false or weakly undeliberated in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry.* These are the observations of a man who loved poetry...and for that they are eminently important."

To draw a portrait of Eliot the man, Neville Braybrooke writes, one must follow hints with guesses; "and this is precisely what Eliot would have liked, because it is a method in which surprises will frequently recur." For instance, Braybrooke continues, one might be shocked to learn that the author of *The Idea of a Christian Society* loved "whoopie cushions and joke cigars. But no man can always stay at the sublime heights, and if, paradoxically enough, some of the more conservative elements in his family were baffled by the sublime heights that he reached in his work, then at least they would have understood his practical joker side." One might also be surprised to learn that the greatest man of letters of his time was devoted to Sherlock Holmes. Durrell writes: "At the mention of the name he lit up like a torch. He, it seemed, was a tremendous fan of Holmes and could quote at length from the saga. 'I flatter myself,' he said—and this is the nearest to an immodesty that I had ever heard him go—'that I know the names of everyone, even the smallest character.' Two minutes afterward he found he could not recall the name of one of Doyle's puppets. His annoyance was comical. He struck his knee with irritation and concentrated. It would not come. Then he burst out laughing at himself." [Allen Tate](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=6750) reports fondly that Eliot's laugh "was never hearty; it was something between a chuckle and a giggle."

The Eliot family motto is *Tace et fac,* and it has been said that he "worked assiduously" and "grew silently." Sir Herbert Read describes him as "a serious but not necessarily a solemn man, a severe man never lacking in kindness and sympathy, a profound man (profoundly learned, profoundly poetic, profoundly spiritual). And yet to outward appearance a correct man, a conventional man, an infinitely polite man—in brief, a gentleman." Richard Poirier writes: "Eliot as a projection of his *oeuvres* has a form distinctly unlike the form of any of his poems. He is infrangible, while his poems are fragmentary and seemingly irresolute about their fragmentariness. His poetry is about the difficulty of conceiving anything. Never merely expressive of ideas already successfully shaped in the mind, his poems enact the mind's effort even to form an idea. Yet he thrives upon some inward assurance, mysterious and not always accessible, that cannot be translated into programmatic thinking or into daytime sense." And Stephen Spender summarizes: "Religiously, poetically and intellectually, this very private man kept open house.... Yet in spite of all this, he was sly, ironic, a bit cagey, a bit calculating perhaps, the Eliot whom Ezra Pound called 'old Possum.'"

One can read the reminiscences of his friends and guess at personal things about "Tom" Eliot (although he would be highly pleased, one is sure, to be able to invalidate our conclusions). Spender, for instance, writes: "[Eliot's] first wife, who had been a dancer ..., was gay, talkative, a chatter-box. She wanted to enjoy life, found Eliot inhibiting and inhibited, yet worshipped him.... There was a time when the Eliots separated, and Eliot lived by himself, wore a monocle, was known to the neighbours as Captain Eliot." Aldous Huxley once told Robert Craft that "the marriage in *The Cocktail Party* was inspired—if that is the word—by Tom's own [first] marriage. His wife, Vivienne, was an ether addict, you know, and the house smelled like a hospital. All that dust and despair in Eliot's poetry is to be traced to this fact." Derek Stanford, too, has done some conjecturing about the subjectivity of Eliot's work. Citing the well-known lines, "Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children, / Hidden excitedly, containing laughter. / Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind / Cannot bear very much reality," Stanford writes: "This is as near to confession as Eliot need ever come. *The Four Quartets*are deeply concerned with first and last things, with archetypal experience and states: birth, pro-creation, death, judgment, salvation, damnation; and if I read this passage aright it originates in Eliot's loss and need of domestic life before his second marriage." But, as Stanford later points out, the origin doesn't really matter.

Of course Eliot himself has told us ("no," says Stravinsky, "Eliot never 'told,' he imparted") something about his life, his work, and the circumstances of the former as they are manifested in the latter. He told Hall that he began to write poetry when he was about fourteen years old, "under the inspiration of Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam,*[and I wrote] a number of very gloomy and atheistical and despairing quatrains in the same style, which fortunately I suppressed completely—so completely that they don't exist." When [George Seferis](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=80990) asked him how he wrote *The Waste Land,* Eliot answered: "I'd been sick and the doctors recommended rest. I went to Mar-gate (he smiled), in November. There I wrote the first part. Then I went to Switzerland on vacation and finished the poem. It was double its present length. I sent it to Pound; he cut out half of it." (The half which Pound excised and which was thought for many years to be lost or destroyed was found recently and has been on display at the New York Public Library.) (Leonard Unger adds that Pound the mentor also "persuaded Eliot not to use as epigraph a quotation from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* not to use *'*[*Gerontion*](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=176666)*'* as a prelude to *The Waste Land,* [and] to retain the section called 'Death by Water' [which is Eliot's translation of his own French verses in 'Dans le Restaurant']." When the resultant poem appeared, "the first issue of *Time* [March 3, 1923] reported the rumor that *The Waste Land* was written as a hoax.") Eliot also told Hall: "Whether I write or type, composition of any length, a play for example, means for me regular hours, say ten to one. I found that three hours a day is about all I can do of actual composing." He told Durrell that "a poet must be deliberately lazy. One should write as little as one possibly can. I always try to make the whole business seem as unimportant as I can." Durrell once tried to persuade Eliot to go to Greece, but Eliot said that he "preferred gloomy places to write in." When Hall asked him if "the optimal career for a poet would involve no work at all but writing and reading," Eliot said, "No, ... it is very dangerous to give an optimal career for everybody.... I feel quite sure that if I'd started by having independent means, if I hadn't had to bother about earning a living and could have given all my time to poetry, it would have had a deadening influence on me."

Eliot has said that his poetry "has obviously more in common with my distinguished contemporaries in America than with anything written in my generation in England. That I'm sure of." He admits that, in his own youth, he had very little sense of the literary times, that he felt no dominating presence of an older poet as one now feels the immediate influence of Eliot, Pound, and Stevens. "I think it was rather an advantage not having any living poets in England or America in whom one took any particular interest," he told Hall. "I don't know what it would be like, but I think it would be a rather troublesome distraction to have such a lot of dominating presences ... about. Fortunately we weren't bothered by each other.... There was Yeats, but it was the early Yeats. It was too much Celtic twilight for me. There was really nothing except the people of the 90's who had all died of drink or suicide or one thing or another."

Publication of Eliot's *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems, 1909-1917* in 1997 sheds new light on the young poet. As Sarah Lyall notes in the *New York Times,* these poems were not meant by Eliot for publication. Sold to his friend and patron, John Quinn in 1922, "The poet's instructions could not have been more clear. 'I beg you fervently to keep them to yourself and see that they are never printed.'" While Eliot found them inferior, much was made over the poems' content. As Paul Levy notes in *The Wall Street Journal:* "These 'poems' are not helpful to those who wish to defend Eliot from charges of racism and anti-Semitism." They include "bawdy, scatalogical limericks with racist imagery that describe, among other things, the encounter of a highly sexed Christopher Columbus with King Bolo, a well-endowed black monarch," states Lyall. The editor, Christopher Ricks, notes these were previously published in other collections and were commented on by Conrad Aiken almost fifty years ago. The collection as a whole provides additional insight into Eliot's evolution as a poet. Concludes Levy, "These formerly lost early works are meaning-laden exceptions to...Eliot's magpie poetic method, the making of patchwork patterns of phrases and strings of words, very often borrowed from other poets' verses, without the use of quotation marks. We can now more easily trace the development of the (relatively) meaning-free mature works and see, in his concern for formal configuration, the evolution of a genuine modernist."

Today, as always, critical evaluations include sincere dislike of Eliot's work. In 1963[John Frederick Nims](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=5013) observed that Eliot "woos the lugubrious," that his poems "are a bore, obtruding and exhorting, buttonholing us with 'Redeem the time' and so forth." Though Nims concedes that Eliot "outranks ... just about all [contemporary poets]," he is concerned because Eliot does not readily enchant the reader, and because his poetry tends to translate easily. The sterility, inaction, detachment, and despair which dominate Eliot's poetry are, in the opinion of several critics, epitomized in V.S. Pritchett's description of Eliot as "a trim anti-Bohemian with black bowler and umbrella ... ushering us to our seats in hell." But for most, Eliot was, at the time of his death, the most imposing literary figure in the world. As early as 1917 Eliot declared: "The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered." Stephen Spender writes: "I think it can now be said that the novelties he introduced—none more striking than the reappearance of *ideas* in poetry—have been assimilated and become part of that marvelous order, now slightly altered, of imperishable works in English." Frank Kermode adds: "Eliot certainly has the marks of a modern kind of greatness, those beneficial intuitions of irregularity and chaos, the truth of the foul rag-and-bone shop. Yet we remember him as celebrating order. Over the years be explored the implications of his attitudes to order, and it is doubtful whether many people capable of understanding him now have much sympathy with his views. His greatness will rest on the fruitful recognition of disorder, though the theories will have their interest as theories held by a great man." And Scott-James has said that Eliot "brought into poetry something which in this generation was needed: a language spare, sinewy, modern; a fresh and springy metrical form; thought that was adult; and an imagination aware of what is bewildering and terrifying in modern life and in all life. He has done more than any other [contemporary] English poet to make this age conscious of itself, and, in being conscious, apprehensive."

Eliot himself once said: "One seems to become a myth, a fabulous creature that doesn't exist. One doesn't feel any different. It isn't that you get bigger to fit the world, the world gets smaller to fit you. You remain exactly the same. Obscurity in writing is confused with novelty." But as Eliot's reputation grew, his poetry became increasingly more private. He never attempted to "redeem mankind"; but he did give to his age, as John Gross writes, "an idiom and a mythology." In 1948 his contribution was justly recognized. Harvey Breit tells us that, "when the official cable from the Nobel Prize Committee in Stockholm reached him, he was immensely pleased. There must have been, it was suggested, some ironic satisfaction as well: ... in the Forties, the recipient of the highest formal literary honor; in the Twenties, Mr. Eliot had been almost universally considered decadent, obscure and a passing fashion. 'It amuses me,' he said without amusement. ('Shall I say it just that way—gently?' [Breit] asked. 'Say it just that way—gently,' he agreed, 'for I don't wish to ridicule anyone.')"

It has been said that Eliot never lost his charm. Analyses of the poetry, the plays, the criticism, will be added for years to come to the many shelves of existing Eliot criticism. Readers will continue to guess about what the man "was really like." But perhaps Frank Morley made the most appropriate statement of all when he related that, while he listened to the funeral service at Westminster Abbey, he was "thinking of Eliot as a man who had very unusual powers of trespass into different hearts."

A memorial service for Eliot at Westminster Abbey, February 4, 1965, was published as *Order of Service in Memory of Thomas Stearns Eliot,* Hove Shirley Press (London), 1965. On June 14, 1965, a program entitled "Homage to T. S. Eliot" was presented at the Globe Theatre in London. To the program Igor Stravinsky contributed "Introitus," a new choral work written in Eliot's memory, and Henry Moore a huge sculpture entitled "The Archer." Andrei Voznesensky, Peter O'Toole, Laurence Olivier, and Paul Scofield recited. Poems read during the program were selected by [W.H. Auden](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=254), and Cleanth Brooks contributed a brief narration.

Eliot's works have been translated into at least twenty-two languages. Harvard University has recorded his readings of *"The Hollow Men,"* *"*[*Gerontion*](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=176666)*,"* *"*[*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=173476)*,"* *"Journey of the Magi,"* *"A Song for Simeon, Triumphal March,"* *"Difficulties of a Statesman,"* *"Fragment of an Agon,"* and *"Four Quartets."*Eliot's readings of *The Waste Land,* *"Landscapes I and II,"*and *"Sweeney Among the Nightingales"* have been recorded by the Library of Congress.

Piano

BY [D. H. LAWRENCE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/d-h-lawrence)

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;

Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see

A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings

And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song

Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong

To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside

And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour

With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour

Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast

Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

POET[D. H. Lawrence](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/d-h-lawrence) 1885–1930

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Modern](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=13)

SUBJECTS[Music](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=50), [Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Youth](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=2), [Time & Brevity](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=38), [Arts & Sciences](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=88), [Sorrow & Grieving](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=101)

POETIC TERMS[Rhymed Stanza,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)[Couplet](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=20)

Not Waving but Drowning

BY [STEVIE SMITH](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/stevie-smith)

Nobody heard him, the dead man,

But still he lay moaning:

I was much further out than you thought

And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking

And now he’s dead

It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,

They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always

(Still the dead one lay moaning)

I was much too far out all my life

And not waving but drowning.

Stevie Smith, “Not Waving but Drowning” from *Collected Poems of Stevie Smith.* Copyright © 1972 by Stevie Smith. Reprinted with the permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

Source: *New Selected Poems* (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1988)

Also available as an audio poem.

POET[Stevie Smith](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/stevie-smith) 1902–1971

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SUBJECTS[Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Disappointment & Failure](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=75), [Death](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=23), [Social Commentaries](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=61)

To His Coy Mistress

BY [ANDREW MARVELL](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/andrew-marvell)

Had we but world enough and time,

This coyness, lady, were no crime.

We would sit down, and think which way

To walk, and pass our long love’s day.

Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side

Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide

Of Humber would complain. I would

Love you ten years before the flood,

And you should, if you please, refuse

Till the conversion of the Jews.

My vegetable love should grow

Vaster than empires and more slow;

An hundred years should go to praise

Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;

Two hundred to adore each breast,

But thirty thousand to the rest;

An age at least to every part,

And the last age should show your heart.

For, lady, you deserve this state,

Nor would I love at lower rate.

       But at my back I always hear

Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near;

And yonder all before us lie

Deserts of vast eternity.

Thy beauty shall no more be found;

Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound

My echoing song; then worms shall try

That long-preserved virginity,

And your quaint honour turn to dust,

And into ashes all my lust;

The grave’s a fine and private place,

But none, I think, do there embrace.

       Now therefore, while the youthful hue

Sits on thy skin like morning dew,

And while thy willing soul transpires

At every pore with instant fires,

Now let us sport us while we may,

And now, like amorous birds of prey,

Rather at once our time devour

Than languish in his slow-chapped power.

Let us roll all our strength and all

Our sweetness up into one ball,

And tear our pleasures with rough strife

Through the iron gates of life:

Thus, though we cannot make our sun

Stand still, yet we will make him run.

POET[Andrew Marvell](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/andrew-marvell) 1621–1678

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[17th Century](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=1)

SUBJECTS[Men & Women](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=10), [Relationships](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=77), [Time & Brevity](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=38), [Love](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=7), [Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Romantic Love](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=110), [Classic Love](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=111),[Desire](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=109), [Infatuation & Crushes](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=113)

HOLIDAYS[Valentine's Day](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#holiday=11)

POETIC TERMS[Couplet](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=20)

Richard Cory

BY [EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/edwin-arlington-robinson)

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,

We people on the pavement looked at him:

He was a gentleman from sole to crown,

Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,

And he was always human when he talked;

But still he fluttered pulses when he said,

"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—

And admirably schooled in every grace:

In fine, we thought that he was everything

To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,

And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;

And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,

Went home and put a bullet through his head.

POET[Edwin Arlington Robinson](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/edwin-arlington-robinson) 1869–1935

POET’S REGION[U.S., New England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=23)

SUBJECTS[Money & Economics](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=66), [Social Commentaries](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=61), [Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Class](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=93), [Death](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=23)

POETIC TERMS[Rhymed Stanza,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)[Persona](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=60)

Ex-Basketball Player

BY [JOHN UPDIKE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-updike)

Pearl Avenue runs past the high-school lot,

Bends with the trolley tracks, and stops, cut off

Before it has a chance to go two blocks,

At Colonel McComsky Plaza. Berth’s Garage

Is on the corner facing west, and there,

Most days, you'll find Flick Webb, who helps Berth out.

Flick stands tall among the idiot pumps—

Five on a side, the old bubble-head style,

Their rubber elbows hanging loose and low.

One’s nostrils are two S’s, and his eyes

An E and O. And one is squat, without

A head at all—more of a football type.

Once Flick played for the high-school team, the Wizards.

He was good: in fact, the best. In ’46

He bucketed three hundred ninety points,

A county record still. The ball loved Flick.

I saw him rack up thirty-eight or forty

In one home game. His hands were like wild birds.

He never learned a trade, he just sells gas,

Checks oil, and changes flats. Once in a while,

As a gag, he dribbles an inner tube,

But most of us remember anyway.

His hands are fine and nervous on the lug wrench.

It makes no difference to the lug wrench, though.

Off work, he hangs around Mae’s Luncheonette.

Grease-gray and kind of coiled, he plays pinball,

Smokes those thin cigars, nurses lemon phosphates.

Flick seldom says a word to Mae, just nods

Beyond her face toward bright applauding tiers

Of Necco Wafers, Nibs, and Juju Beads.

John Updike, “Ex-Basketball Player” from *Collected Poems 1953-1993.* Copyright © 1993 by John Updike. Reprinted with the permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

Source: *Collected Poems 1953-1993* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1993)

POET[John Updike](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-updike) 1932–2009

POET’S REGION[U.S., New England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=23)

SUBJECTS[Activities](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=79), [Youth](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=2), [Social Commentaries](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=61), [Cities & Urban Life](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=95), [Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Midlife](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=74), [Sports & Outdoor Activities](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=24), [Jobs & Working](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=13)

POETIC TERMS[Blank Verse](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=31)

Sonnet  18: Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?

BY [WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-shakespeare)

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

And summer’s lease hath all too short a date;

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;

And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance or nature’s changing course untrimm'd;

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st;

Nor shall death brag thou wander’st in his shade,

When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:

   So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,

   So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

POET[William Shakespeare](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-shakespeare) 1564–1616

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Renaissance](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=17)

SUBJECTS[Nature](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=42), [Relationships](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=77), [Summer](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=36), [Love](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=7), [Romantic Love](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=110), [Classic Love](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=111)

OCCASIONS[Engagement](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#occasion=4), [Anniversary](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#occasion=30), [Weddings](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#occasion=5)

HOLIDAYS[Valentine's Day](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#holiday=11)

POETIC TERMS[Sonnet](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=25)

The Flea

BY [JOHN DONNE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-donne)

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,

How little that which thou deniest me is;

It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,

And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;

Thou know’st that this cannot be said

A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,

    Yet this enjoys before it woo,

    And pampered swells with one blood made of two,

    And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,

Where we almost, nay more than married are.

This flea is you and I, and this

Our mariage bed, and marriage temple is;

Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,

And cloistered in these living walls of jet.

    Though use make you apt to kill me,

    Let not to that, self-murder added be,

    And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since

Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?

Wherein could this flea guilty be,

Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?

Yet thou triumph’st, and say'st that thou

Find’st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;

    ’Tis true; then learn how false, fears be:

    Just so much honor, when thou yield’st to me,

    Will waste, as this flea’s death took life from thee.

Source: *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (1996)

POET[John Donne](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-donne) 1572–1631

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Renaissance](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=17)

SUBJECTS[Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Love](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=7), [Marriage & Companionship](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=8), [Time & Brevity](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=38), [Relationships](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=77), [Classic Love](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=111),[Desire](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=109)

HOLIDAYS[Valentine's Day](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#holiday=11)

POETIC TERMS[Rhymed Stanza,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)[Metaphor](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=41)

A Description of a City Shower

BY [JONATHAN SWIFT](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/jonathan-swift)

Careful observers may foretell the hour

(By sure prognostics) when to dread a shower:

While rain depends, the pensive cat gives o’er

Her frolics, and pursues her tail no more.

Returning home at night, you’ll find the sink

Strike your offended sense with double stink.

If you be wise, then go not far to dine;

You’ll spend in coach hire more than save in wine.

A coming shower your shooting corns presage,

Old achès throb, your hollow tooth will rage.

Sauntering in coffeehouse is Dulman seen;

He damns the climate and complains of spleen.

         Meanwhile the South, rising with dabbled wings,

A sable cloud athwart the welkin flings,

That swilled more liquor than it could contain,

And, like a drunkard, gives it up again.

Brisk Susan whips her linen from the rope,

While the first drizzling shower is born aslope:

Such is that sprinkling which some careless quean

Flirts on you from her mop, but not so clean:

You fly, invoke the gods; then turning, stop

To rail; she singing, still whirls on her mop.

Not yet the dust had shunned the unequal strife,

But, aided by the wind, fought still for life,

And wafted with its foe by violent gust,

’Twas doubtful which was rain and which was dust.

Ah! where must needy poet seek for aid,

When dust and rain at once his coat invade?

Sole coat, where dust cemented by the rain

Erects the nap, and leaves a mingled stain.

         Now in contiguous drops the flood comes down,

Threatening with deluge this devoted town.

To shops in crowds the daggled females fly,

Pretend to cheapen goods, but nothing buy.

The Templar spruce, while every spout’s abroach,

Stays till ’tis fair, yet seems to call a coach.

The tucked-up sempstress walks with hasty strides,

While seams run down her oiled umbrella’s sides.

Here various kinds, by various fortunes led,

Commence acquaintance underneath a shed.

Triumphant Tories and desponding Whigs

Forget their feuds, and join to save their wigs.

Boxed in a chair the beau impatient sits,

While spouts run clattering o’er the roof by fits,

And ever and anon with frightful din

The leather sounds; he trembles from within.

So when Troy chairmen bore the wooden steed,

Pregnant with Greeks impatient to be freed

(Those bully Greeks, who, as the moderns do,

Instead of paying chairmen, run them through),

Laocoön struck the outside with his spear,

And each imprisoned hero quaked for fear.

         Now from all parts the swelling kennels flow,

And bear their trophies with them as they go:

Filth of all hues and odors seem to tell

What street they sailed from, by their sight and smell.

They, as each torrent drives with rapid force,

From Smithfield or St. Pulchre’s shape their course,

And in huge confluence joined at Snow Hill ridge,

Fall from the conduit prone to Holborn Bridge.

Sweepings from butchers’ stalls, dung, guts, and blood,

Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud,

Dead cats, and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood.

POET[Jonathan Swift](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/jonathan-swift) 1667–1745 POET’S REGION[Ireland](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=15) SCHOOL / PERIOD[Augustan](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=2)

SUBJECTS[Activities](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=79), [Jobs & Working](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=13), [Nature](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=42), [Weather](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=43),

POETIC TERMS[Rhymed Stanza](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)

The Rape of the Lock: Canto 1

BY [ALEXANDER POPE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/alexander-pope)

*Nolueram, Belinda, tuos violare capillos;
Sedjuvat, hoc precibus me tribuisse tuis.*
(Martial, *Epigrams* 12.84)

What dire offence from am'rous causes springs,

What mighty contests rise from trivial things,

I sing—This verse to Caryl, Muse! is due:

This, ev'n Belinda may vouchsafe to view:

Slight is the subject, but not so the praise,

If she inspire, and he approve my lays.

       Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel

A well-bred lord t' assault a gentle belle?

O say what stranger cause, yet unexplor'd,

Could make a gentle belle reject a lord?

In tasks so bold, can little men engage,

And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage?

       Sol thro' white curtains shot a tim'rous ray,

And op'd those eyes that must eclipse the day;

Now lap-dogs give themselves the rousing shake,

And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake:

Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knock'd the ground,

And the press'd watch return'd a silver sound.

Belinda still her downy pillow press'd,

Her guardian sylph prolong'd the balmy rest:

'Twas he had summon'd to her silent bed

The morning dream that hover'd o'er her head;

A youth more glitt'ring than a birthnight beau,

(That ev'n in slumber caus'd her cheek to glow)

Seem'd to her ear his winning lips to lay,

And thus in whispers said, or seem'd to say.

       "Fairest of mortals, thou distinguish'd care

Of thousand bright inhabitants of air!

If e'er one vision touch'd thy infant thought,

Of all the nurse and all the priest have taught,

Of airy elves by moonlight shadows seen,

The silver token, and the circled green,

Or virgins visited by angel pow'rs,

With golden crowns and wreaths of heav'nly flow'rs,

Hear and believe! thy own importance know,

Nor bound thy narrow views to things below.

Some secret truths from learned pride conceal'd,

To maids alone and children are reveal'd:

What tho' no credit doubting wits may give?

The fair and innocent shall still believe.

Know then, unnumber'd spirits round thee fly,

The light militia of the lower sky;

These, though unseen, are ever on the wing,

Hang o'er the box, and hover round the Ring.

Think what an equipage thou hast in air,

And view with scorn two pages and a chair.

As now your own, our beings were of old,

And once inclos'd in woman's beauteous mould;

Thence, by a soft transition, we repair

From earthly vehicles to these of air.

Think not, when woman's transient breath is fled,

That all her vanities at once are dead;

Succeeding vanities she still regards,

And tho' she plays no more, o'erlooks the cards.

Her joy in gilded chariots, when alive,

And love of ombre, after death survive.

For when the fair in all their pride expire,

To their first elements their souls retire:

The sprites of fiery termagants in flame

Mount up, and take a Salamander's name.

Soft yielding minds to water glide away,

And sip with Nymphs, their elemental tea.

The graver prude sinks downward to a Gnome,

In search of mischief still on earth to roam.

The light coquettes in Sylphs aloft repair,

And sport and flutter in the fields of air.

       Know further yet; whoever fair and chaste

Rejects mankind, is by some sylph embrac'd:

For spirits, freed from mortal laws, with ease

Assume what sexes and what shapes they please.

What guards the purity of melting maids,

In courtly balls, and midnight masquerades,

Safe from the treach'rous friend, the daring spark,

The glance by day, the whisper in the dark,

When kind occasion prompts their warm desires,

When music softens, and when dancing fires?

'Tis but their sylph, the wise celestials know,

Though honour is the word with men below.

       Some nymphs there are, too conscious of their face,

For life predestin'd to the gnomes' embrace.

These swell their prospects and exalt their pride,

When offers are disdain'd, and love denied:

Then gay ideas crowd the vacant brain,

While peers, and dukes, and all their sweeping train,

And garters, stars, and coronets appear,

And in soft sounds 'Your Grace' salutes their ear.

'Tis these that early taint the female soul,

Instruct the eyes of young coquettes to roll,

Teach infant cheeks a bidden blush to know,

And little hearts to flutter at a beau.

       Oft, when the world imagine women stray,

The Sylphs through mystic mazes guide their way,

Thro' all the giddy circle they pursue,

And old impertinence expel by new.

What tender maid but must a victim fall

To one man's treat, but for another's ball?

When Florio speaks, what virgin could withstand,

If gentle Damon did not squeeze her hand?

With varying vanities, from ev'ry part,

They shift the moving toyshop of their heart;

Where wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive,

Beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive.

This erring mortals levity may call,

Oh blind to truth! the Sylphs contrive it all.

       Of these am I, who thy protection claim,

A watchful sprite, and Ariel is my name.

Late, as I rang'd the crystal wilds of air,

In the clear mirror of thy ruling star

I saw, alas! some dread event impend,

Ere to the main this morning sun descend,

But Heav'n reveals not what, or how, or where:

Warn'd by the Sylph, oh pious maid, beware!

This to disclose is all thy guardian can.

Beware of all, but most beware of man!"

       He said; when Shock, who thought she slept too long,

Leap'd up, and wak'd his mistress with his tongue.

'Twas then, Belinda, if report say true,

Thy eyes first open'd on a billet-doux;

Wounds, charms, and ardors were no sooner read,

But all the vision vanish'd from thy head.

       And now, unveil'd, the toilet stands display'd,

Each silver vase in mystic order laid.

First, rob'd in white, the nymph intent adores

With head uncover'd, the cosmetic pow'rs.

A heav'nly image in the glass appears,

To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;

Th' inferior priestess, at her altar's side,

Trembling, begins the sacred rites of pride.

Unnumber'd treasures ope at once, and here

The various off'rings of the world appear;

From each she nicely culls with curious toil,

And decks the goddess with the glitt'ring spoil.

This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,

And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.

The tortoise here and elephant unite,

Transform'd to combs, the speckled and the white.

Here files of pins extend their shining rows,

Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux.

Now awful beauty puts on all its arms;

The fair each moment rises in her charms,

Repairs her smiles, awakens ev'ry grace,

And calls forth all the wonders of her face;

Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,

And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.

The busy Sylphs surround their darling care;

These set the head, and those divide the hair,

Some fold the sleeve, whilst others plait the gown;

And Betty's prais'd for labours not her own.

POET[Alexander Pope](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/alexander-pope) 1688–1744

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Augustan](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=2)

SUBJECTS[Men & Women](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=10), [Arts & Sciences](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=88), [Relationships](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=77), [Humor & Satire](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=48), [Social Commentaries](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=61),[Friends & Enemies](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=11)

POETIC TERMS[Couplet,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=20)[Epic](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=54)

The Chimney Sweeper: A little black thing among the snow

BY [WILLIAM BLAKE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-blake)

A little black thing among the snow,

Crying "weep! 'weep!" in notes of woe!

"Where are thy father and mother? say?"

"They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Because I was happy upon the heath,

And smil'd among the winter's snow,

They clothed me in the clothes of death,

And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy and dance and sing,

They think they have done me no injury,

And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King,

Who make up a heaven of our misery."

POET[William Blake](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-blake) 1757–1827

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Romantic](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=18)

SUBJECTS[Religion](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=67), [Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Social Commentaries](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=61), [Youth](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=2), [Faith & Doubt](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=81), [Class](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=93), [Christianity](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=86), [God & the Divine](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=82)

POETIC TERMS[Dramatic Monologue,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=15)[Couplet,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=20)[Imagery](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=42)

The Chimney Sweeper: When my mother died I was very young

BY [WILLIAM BLAKE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-blake)

When my mother died I was very young,

And my father sold me while yet my tongue

Could scarcely cry " 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"

So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head

That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, so I said,

"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,

You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

And so he was quiet, & that very night,

As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!

That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,

Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,

And he opened the coffins & set them all free;

Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,

And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,

They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.

And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,

He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark

And got with our bags & our brushes to work.

Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;

So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

POET[William Blake](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-blake) 1757–1827

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Romantic](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=18)

SUBJECTS[Social Commentaries](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=61), [Activities](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=79), [Jobs & Working](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=13)

POETIC TERMS[Couplet](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=20)

William Blake

1757–1827

<http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/>



In his *Life of William Blake*(1863) Alexander Gilchrist warned his readers that Blake "neither wrote nor drew for the many, hardly for work'y-day men at all, rather for children and angels; himself 'a divine child,' whose playthings were sun, moon, and stars, the heavens and the earth." Yet Blake himself believed that his writings were of national importance and that they could be understood by a majority of men. Far from being an isolated mystic, Blake lived and worked in the teeming metropolis of London at a time of great social and political change that profoundly influenced his writing. After the peace established in 1762, the British Empire seemed secure, but the storm wave begun with the American Revolution in 1775 and the French Revolution in 1789 changed forever the way men looked at their relationship to the state and to the established church. Poet, painter, and engraver, Blake worked to bring about a change both in the social order and in the minds of men.

One may wonder how a child born in moderate surroundings would become such an original artist and powerful writer. Unlike many well-known writers of his day, Blake was born into a family of moderate means. His father, James, was a hosier, one who sells stockings, gloves, and haberdashery, and the family lived at 28 Broad Street in London in an unpretentious but "respectable" neighborhood. Blake was born on 28 November 1757. In all, seven children were born to James and Catherine Harmitage Blake, but only five survived infancy. Blake seems to have been closest to his youngest brother, Robert, who died while yet young.

By all accounts Blake had a pleasant and peaceful childhood, made even more pleasant by his skipping any formal schooling. As a young boy he wandered the streets of London and could easily escape to the surrounding countryside. Even at an early age, however, his unique mental powers would prove disquieting. According to Gilchrist, on one ramble he was startled to "see a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars." His parents were not amused at such a story, and only his mother's pleadings prevented him from receiving a beating.

His parents did, however, encourage his artistic talents, and the young Blake was enrolled at the age of ten in Pars' drawing school. The expense of continued formal training in art, however, was a prohibitive one, and the family decided that at the age of fourteen William would be apprenticed to a master engraver. At first his father took him to William Ryland, a highly respected engraver. William, however, resisted the arrangement telling his father, "I do not like the man's face: it looks as if he will live to be hanged!" The grim prophecy was to come true twelve years later. Instead of Ryland the family settled on a lesser-known engraver but a man of considerable talents, James Basire. Basire seems to have been a good master, and Blake was a good student of the craft. Blake was later to be especially grateful to Basire for sending the young student to Westminster Abbey to make drawings of monuments Basire was commissioned to engrave. The vast Gothic dimensions of Westminster and the haunting presence of the tombs of kings affected Blake's romantic sensibilities and were to provide fertile ground for his active imagination.

At the age of twenty-one Blake left Basire's apprenticeship and enrolled for a time in the newly formed Royal Academy. It was as a journeyman engraver, however, that Blake earned his living. Booksellers employed him to engrave illustrations for publications ranging from novels such as *Don Quixote* to serials such as *Ladies' Magazine*.

One incident at this time affected Blake deeply. In June of 1780 riots broke out in London incited by the anti-Catholic preaching of Lord [George Gordon](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=81299) but also by resistance to continued war against the American colonists. Houses, churches, and prisons were burned by uncontrollable mobs bent on destruction. On one evening, whether by design or by accident, Blake found himself at the front of the mob that burned Newgate prison. These images of violent destruction and unbridled revolution gave Blake powerful material for works such as *Europe* (1794) and *America* (1793).

Not all of the young man's interests were confined to art and politics. After one ill-fated romance, Blake met Catherine Boucher, an attractive and compassionate woman who took pity on Blake's tales of being spurned. After a year's courtship the couple were married on 18 August 1782. The parish registry shows that Catherine, like many women of her class, could not sign her own name. Blake soon taught her to read and to write, and under Blake's tutoring she also became an accomplished draftsman, helping him in the execution of his designs.

By all accounts the marriage was a successful one, but no children were born to the Blakes. Catherine also managed the household affairs and was undoubtedly of great help in making ends meet on Blake's always limited income.

Blake's friend John Flaxman introduced Blake to the bluestocking Harriet Mathew, wife of the Rev. Henry Mathew and a celebrated lady of fashion whose drawing room was often a meeting place for artists and musicians. There Blake gained favor by reciting and even singing his early poems. Thanks to the support of Flaxman and Mrs. Mathew, a thin volume of poems was published under the title *Poetical Sketches*(1783). Many of these poems are imitations of classical models, much like the sketches of models of antiquity the young artist made to learn his trade. Even here, however, one sees signs of Blake's protest against war and the tyranny of kings. David Erdman argues that the ballad "Gwin, King of Norway" is a protest against King George's treatment of the American colonies, a subject Blake treated more extensively in*America* (1793). Only about fifty copies of *Poetical Sketches* are known to have been printed. Blake's financial enterprises also did not fare well. In 1784, after his father's death, Blake used part of the money he inherited to set up shop as a printseller with his friend James Parker. The Blakes moved to 27 Broad Street, next door to the family home and close to Blake's brothers. The business did not do well, however, and the Blakes soon moved out.

Of more concern to Blake was the deteriorating health of his favorite brother, Robert. Blake tended to his brother in his illness and according to Gilchrist watched the spirit of his brother escape his body in his death: "At the last solemn moment, the visionary eyes beheld the released spirit ascend heaven ward through the matter-of-fact ceiling, 'clapping its hands for joy.'"

Blake always felt the spirit of Robert lived with him. He even announced that it was Robert who informed him how to illustrate his poems in "illuminated writing." Blake's technique was to produce his text and design on a copper plate with an impervious liquid. The plate was then dipped in acid so that the text and design remained in relief. That plate could be used to print on paper, and the final copy would be then hand colored.

After experimenting with this method in a series of aphorisms entitled *There is No Natural Religion* and *All Religions are One* (1788?), Blake designed the series of plates for the poems entitled *Songs of Innocence* and dated the title page 1789. Blake continued to experiment with the process of illuminated writing and in 1794 combined the early poems with companion poems entitled *Songs of Experience*. The title page of the combined set announces that the poems show "the two Contrary States of the Human Soul." Clearly Blake meant for the two series of poems to be read together, and Robert Gleckner has pointed out in reading the poems one should always consider the point of view of the speaker of the poem and the context of the situation.

The introductory poems to each series display Blake's dual image of the poet as both a "piper" and a "Bard." As man goes through various stages of innocence and experience in the poems, the poet also is in different stages of innocence and experience. The pleasant lyrical aspect of poetry is shown in the role of the "piper" while the more somber prophetic nature of poetry is displayed by the stern Bard.

In the "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence*, Blake presents the poet in the form of a simple shepherd: "Piping down the valleys wild / Piping songs of pleasant glee." The frontispiece displays a young shepherd simply dressed and holding a pipe, and it is clear Blake is establishing a pastoral world. The "piping songs" are poems of pure pleasure.

The songs of pleasure are interrupted by the visionary appearance of an angel who asks for songs of more seriousness:

"Pipe a song about a Lamb!"

So I piped with merry chear.

"Piper, pipe that song again."

So I piped: he wept to hear.

The piper is no longer playing his songs for his own enjoyment. Now the piper is in the position of a poet playing at the request of an appreciative audience. The "song about a Lamb" suggests a poem about the "Lamb of God," Christ.

The child commands that the poet not keep the songs for himself but share them with his audience:

"Piper sit thee down and write

In a book that all may read."

So he vanish'd from my sight

And I pluck'd a hollow reed.

The "book" is *Songs of Innocence*, which is designed in a form that "all may read." The simple piper is now a true poet. He no longer writes only for his own enjoyment but for the delight of his audience. The piper is inspired by the directions of the child, and the poet is inspired by his vision of his audience. The child vanishes as the author interiorizes his vision of his audience and makes it a central part of his work. Immediately after the child's disappearance, the author begins the actual physical composition of the poem by plucking the hollow reed for his poem. At the end of the poem the poet is no longer the simple shepherd of Arcadia playing for his own amusement. Now he writes his poems for "Every child" of England.

The "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience* is a companion to the earlier poem, and, as a poem written in the state of experience, it presents a different view of the nature of the poet and his relation to his audience.

The strident tone of the first stanza provides a marked contrast to the gentle piping of the first poem and reminds us that we are now in the state of experience:

Hear the voice of the Bard!

Who Present, Past and Future sees:

Whose ears have heard

The Holy Word

That walk'd among the ancient trees.

This is not an invocation, but a direct command to the reader to sit up and pay attention. Instead of playing at the request of his audience, the poet now demands that his reader listen to him. The speaker now has authority because of what he has heard. The voice of the poet is that of the ancient Bard and that also of the biblical prophet who has heard the "Holy Word," the word of God. Assuming the role of the prophet and the Bard gives the modern poet a sense of biblical authority to speak on matters sacred and profane.

With his authority, the Bard is more willing to instruct his audience than is the piper. The Bard repeats the call of the Holy Word to fallen man. The message repeated by the Bard is that man still "might control" the world of nature and bring back the "fallen light" of vision.

Blake presents two sides of his view of the poet in these introductory poems. Neither one should be dismissed in favor of the other. The poet is both a pleasant piper playing at the request of his audience and a stern Bard lecturing an entire nation. In part this is Blake's interpretation of the ancient dictum that poetry should both delight and instruct. More important, for Blake the poet is a man who speaks both from the personal experience of his own vision and from the "inherited" tradition of ancient Bards and prophets who carried the Holy Word to the nations.

In reading any of the poems, one has to be aware of the mental "state" of the speaker of the poems. In some cases the speakers address the same issue, but from entirely different perspectives. The child of "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence*lives in deplorable conditions and is clearly exploited by those around him: "So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep." Yet in his childish state he explains away his misery with a dream of a promised afterlife where God will be his father and he will "never want joy." The same issue of child exploitation is addressed in "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Songs of Experience*. The speaker is also a child, but one who understands the social forces that have reduced him to misery:

"And because I am happy, & dance & sing

They think they have done me no injury.

And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King.

Who make up a heaven of our misery."

In each poem the reader can see what the speaker can not always see because of his unique perspective: religion and government share a responsibility in the persecution of children.

The famous companion poems "[The Lamb](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=172926)" and "[The Tyger](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=172943)" are also written on the same subject: man's conception of God. Yet, how man understands God depends on man's view of God's divinity. In "The Lamb" the speaker makes the traditional association between a lamb and the "Lamb of God," Christ:

For he calls himself a Lamb:

He is meek & he is mild;

He became a little child:

I a child & thou a lamb.

The speaker sees God in terms he can understand. God is gentle and kind and very much like us. The close association between the "I," "child," and "lamb" suggests that all men share in the same spiritual brotherhood.

The speaker in "The Tyger" also sees God in terms he can understand, but he sees him from a different perspective. The raging violence of the animal forces him to ask what kind of God could create such terror:

When the stars threw down their spears,

And water'd heaven with their tears,

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

The answer, of course, is never given, but again the reader should be able to perceive more than the speaker of the poem. God did make both the lamb and the tyger, and his nature contains both the gentleness of the lamb and the violence of the tyger. Neither perspective is true by itself; both have to be understood.

The two states of innocence and experience are not always clearly separate in the poems, and one can see signs of both states in many poems. The companion poems titled "Holy Thursday" are on the same subject, the forced marching of poor children to St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The speaker in the state of innocence approves warmly of the progression of children:

'Twas on a Holy Thursday their innocent faces clean

The children walking two & two in red & blue & green

Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands as white as snow

Till into the high dome of Pauls they like Thames waters flow[.]

The brutal irony is that in this world of truly "innocent" children there are evil men who repress the children, round them up like so many herd of cattle, and force them to show their piety. In this state of innocence, experience is very much present.

The speaker of the companion "Holy Thursday" presents an entirely different perspective:

Is this a holy thing to see,

In a rich and fruitful land,

Babes reduc'd to misery,

Fed with cold and usurous hand?

The speaker of experience understands that the children have been brutalized and places the blame for this condition not just on the "Grey headed beadles" who have direct responsibility for the children but on the country at large. In a "rich and fruitful land" like England, it is appalling that children are allowed to suffer:

For where-e'er the sun does shine,

And where-e'er the rain does fall:

Babe can never hunger there,

Nor poverty the mind appall[.]

If experience has a way of creeping into the world of innocence, innocence also has a way of creeping into experience. The golden land where the "sun does shine" and the "rain does fall" is a land of bountiful goodness and innocence. But even here in this blessed land, there are children starving. The sharp contrast between the two conditions makes the social commentary all the more striking and supplies the energy of the poem.

The contrast between innocence and experience is also apparent in another illuminated book produced in 1789, *The Book of Thel*. Thel is a maiden who laments the passing of youth and of innocence: "O life of this our spring! why fades the lotus of the water, / Why fade these children of the spring, born but to smile & fall?" Thel questions elements of nature, like the Lilly of the Valley and the Cloud, that are beautiful but transitory. Yet each understands that the transitory nature of beauty is necessary. The Cloud answers Thel's complaint by saying that "Every thing that lives / Lives not alone nor for itself." Thel is innocent but when one is stuck in a state of innocence there can be no growth.

Thel is allowed to enter into the world of experience, and she is startled by a voice from her own grave:

"Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy?

Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?"

The Virgin is shocked by this peek into her own sexuality and mortality and runs back to the quiet vales of Har "with a shriek." Blake satirizes those who are unable to see the necessary connection between innocence and experience, the spiritual world and the physical world. Thel's world of soft watercolors is not enough. She cannot understand that even the lowly worm is loved by God and serves his part in creating life.

The storming of the Bastille in Paris in 1789 and the agonies of the French Revolution sent shock waves through England. Some hoped for a corresponding outbreak of liberty in England while others feared a breakdown of the social order. In much of his writing Blake argues against the monarchy. In his early *Tiriel* (written circa 1789) Blake traces the fall of a tyrannical king.

Politics was surely often the topic of conversation at the publisher Joseph Johnson's house, where Blake was often invited. There Blake met important literary and political figures such as William Godwin, Joseph Priestly, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Thomas Paine. According to one legend Blake is even said to have saved Paine's life by warning him of his impending arrest. Whether or not that is true, it is clear that Blake was familiar with some of the leading radical thinkers of his day.

In *The French Revolution*Blake celebrates the rise of democracy in France and the fall of the monarchy. King Louis represents a monarchy that is old and dying. The sick king is lethargic and unable to act: "From my window I see the old mountains of France, like aged men, fading away." The "old mountains" of monarchy are doomed to collapse under the pressure of the people and their representatives in the assembly. The "voice of the people" demands the removal of the king's troops from Paris, and their departure at the end of the first book signals the triumph of democracy.

On the title page for book one of *The French Revolution* Blake announces that it is "A Poem in Seven Books," but none of the other books has been found. The "Advertisement" to the poem promises "The remaining Books of the Poem are finished, and will be published in their Order." The first book was set in type in 1791, but exists only in proof copies. Johnson never published the poem, perhaps because of fear of prosecution, or perhaps because Blake himself withdrew it from publication. Johnson did have cause to be nervous. Erdman points out that in the same year booksellers were thrown in jail for selling the works of Thomas Paine.

In *America* (1793) Blake also addresses the idea of revolution, but the poem is less a commentary on the actual revolution in America as it is a commentary on universal principles that are at work in any revolution. The fiery figure of Orc represents all revolutions:

The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,

What night he led the starry hosts thro' the wide wilderness,

That stony law I stamp to dust; and scatter religion abroad

To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves.

The same force that causes the colonists to rebel against King George is the force that overthrows the perverted rules and restrictions of established religions.

The revolution in America suggests to Blake a similar revolution in England. In the poem the king, like the ancient pharaohs of Egypt, sends pestilence to America to punish the rebels, but the colonists are able to redirect the forces of destruction to England. Erdman suggests that Blake is thinking of the riots in England during the war and the chaotic condition of the English troops, many of whom deserted. Writing this poem in the 1790s, Blake also surely imagined the possible effect of the French Revolution on England.

Another product of the radical 1790s is *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Written and etched between 1790 and 1793, Blake's poem brutally satirizes oppressive authority in church and state. The poem also satirizes the works of Emanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish philosopher whose ideas once attracted Blake's interests.

The powerful opening of the poem suggests a world of violence: "Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the burden'd air / Hungry clouds swag on the deep." The fire and smoke suggest a battlefield and the chaos of revolution. The cause of that chaos is analyzed at the beginning of the poem. The world has been turned upside down. The "just man" has been turned away from the institutions of church and state, and in his place are fools and hypocrites who preach law and order but create chaos. Those who proclaim restrictive moral rules and oppressive laws as "goodness" are in themselves evil. Hence to counteract this repression, Blake announces that he is of the "Devil's Party" that will advocate freedom and energy and gratified desire.

The "Proverbs of Hell" are clearly designed to shock the reader out of his commonplace notion of what is good and what is evil:

Prisons are built with stones of Law,

Brothels with bricks of Religion.

The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.

The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.

The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.

The nakedness of woman is the work of God.

It is the oppressive nature of church and state that has created the repulsive prisons and brothels. Sexual energy is not an inherent "evil," but the repression of that energy is. The preachers of morality fail to understand that God is in all things, including the sexual nature of men and women.

Blake is, of course, not advocating moral and political anarchy, but a proper balance of energy and its opposing force, reason. Reason is defined as "the bound or outward circumference of Energy." Reason is a vital and necessary force to define Energy, and "Without Contraries is no progression." The problem now is that the forces of reason have predominated, and the forces of energy must be let loose.

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*contains many of the basic religious ideas developed in the major prophecies. Blake analyzes the development of organized religion as a perversion of ancient visions: "The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & Numerous senses could perceive." Ancient man created those gods to express his vision of the spiritual properties that he perceived in the physical world. So far, so good, but the gods began to take on a life of their own separate from man: "Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of, & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood." The "system" or organized religion keeps man from perceiving the spiritual in the physical. The gods are seen as separate from man, and an elite race of priests is developed to approach the gods: "Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast." Instead of looking for God on remote altars, Blake warns, man should look within.

In August of 1790 Blake moved from his house on Poland Street across the Thames to the area known as Lambeth. The Blakes lived in the house for ten years, and the surrounding neighborhood often becomes mythologized in his poetry. Felpham was a "lovely vale," a place of trees and open meadows, but it also contained signs of human cruelty, such as the house for orphans. At his home Blake kept busy not only with his illuminated poetry but also with the daily chore of making money. During the 1790s Blake earned fame as an engraver and was glad to receive numerous commissions.

One story told by Blake's friend Thomas Butts shows how much the Blakes enjoyed the pastoral surroundings of Lambeth. At the end of Blake's garden was a small summer house, and coming to call on the Blakes one day Butts was shocked to find the couple stark naked: "Come in!" cried Blake; "it's only Adam and Eve you know!" The Blakes were reciting passages from *Paradise Lost*, apparently "in character."

Sexual freedom is addressed in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), also written during the Lambeth period. Oothoon, the "soft soul of America," expresses her unrestricted love for Theotormon who cannot accept such love because he is limited by jealousy and possessiveness. In the poem Oothoon is raped by Bromion, and the enraged Theotormon binds the two together. The frontispiece to the book shows Bromion and Oothoon back-to-back with their arms bound together while Theotormon, hunched over, stares at the ground. The relationship between Bromion and Oothoon is like that of marriage that is held together only by laws and not by love. In her lament to Theotormon, Oothoon denounces the destruction of a woman's sexual desire:

Till she who burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot, is bound

In spells of law to one she loathes? and must she drag the chain

Of life in weary lust?

The marriage "spells of law" bind a woman to man much like a slave is bound to a master, and marriage can become, in Mary Wollstonecraft's phrase, a form of "legalized prostitution."

Oothoon calls for the freedom of desire: "Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty appears" and even promises to provide women for Theotormon to enjoy "in lovely copulation," but Theotormon, bound by law and custom, cannot accept such love.

In 1793-1795 Blake produced a remarkable collection of illuminated works that have come to be known as the "Minor Prophecies." In *Europe* (1794), *The First Book of Urizen* (1794), *The Book of Los* (1795), *The Song of Los* (1795), and *The Book of Ahania* (1795) Blake develops the major outlines of his universal mythology. In these poems Blake examines the fall of man. In Blake's mythology man and God were once united, but man separated himself from God and became weaker and weaker as he became further divided. Throughout the poems Blake writes of the destructive aspects of this separation into warring identities.

The narrative of the universal mythology is interwoven with the historical events of Blake's own time. The execution of King Louis XVI in 1793 led to an inevitable reaction, and England soon declared war on France. England's participation in the war against France and its attempt to quell the revolutionary spirit is addressed in *Europe*. In Blake's poem liberty is repressed in England after it declares war on France:

Over the windows Thou shalt not; & over the chimneys

Fear is written

With bands of iron round their necks fasten'd into

the walls of citizens

The very force of that repression, however, will cause its opposite to appear in the revolutionary figure of Orc: "And in the vineyards of reds France appear'd the light of his fury." Orc promises fire and destruction, but he also wars against the forces of repression.

Blake's minor prophecies are, of course, much more than political commentaries. In these poems Blake analyzes the universal forces at work when repression and revolution clash. Erdman has pointed out the historical parallel in *Europe* between Rintrah and William Pitt, the English Prime Minister who led his country into war against France. Yet in the same poem we see references to repression from the time of Christ to the Last Judgement. Blake saw English repression of the French Revolution as but one moment in the stream of history.

The causes of that repression are examined in *The First Book of Urizen*. The word*Urizen* suggests "your reason" and also "horizon." He represents that part of the mind that constantly defines and limits human thought and action. In the frontispiece to the poem he is pictured as an aged man hunched over a massive book writing with both hands in other books. Behind him stand the tablets of the ten commandments, and Urizen is surely writing other "thou shalt nots" for others to follow. His twisted anatomical position shows the perversity of what should be the "human form divine."

The poem traces the birth of Urizen as a separate part of the human mind. He broods upon himself and comes to insist on laws for all to follow:

"One command, one joy, one desire

One curse, one weight, one measure,

One King, one God, one Law."

Urizen's repressive laws bring only further chaos and destruction. Like Milton's hell, Urizen's world is filled with the contradictions of darkness and fire: "no light from the fires." The lawgiver can only produce destruction, not understanding. Appalled by the chaos he himself created, Urizen fashions a world apart.

The process of separation continues as the character of Los is divided from Urizen. Los, the "Eternal Prophet," represents another power of the human mind. Los forges the creative aspects of the mind into works of art. Like Urizen he is a limiter, but the limitations he creates are productive and necessary. In the poem Los forms "nets and gins" to bring an end to Urizen's continual chaotic separation.

Los is horrified by the figure of the bound Urizen and is separated by his pity, "for Pity divides the Soul." Los undergoes a separation into a male and female form. His female form is called Enitharmon, and her creation is viewed with horror:

Eternity shudder'd when they saw

Man begetting his likeness

On his own divided image.

This separation into separate sexual identities is yet another sign of man's fall. The "Eternals" contain both male and female forms within themselves, but man is divided and weak.

Enitharmon gives birth to the fiery Orc, whose violent birth gives some hope for radical change in a fallen world, but Orc is bound in chains by Los, now a victim of jealousy. Enitharmon bears an "enormous race," but it is a race of men and women who are weak and divided and who have lost sight of eternity.

Urizen explores the fallen world, spreading his "Net of Religion" over the cities of men:

And their children wept, & built

Tombs in the desolate places,

And form'd laws of prudence, and call'd them

The eternal laws of God.

In his fallen state man has limited senses and fails to perceive the infinite. Divided from God and caught by the narrow traps of religion, he sees God only as a crude lawgiver who must be obeyed.

*The Book of Los* also examines man's fall and the binding of Urizen, but from the perspective of Los whose task it is to place a limit on the chaotic separation begun by Urizen. The decayed world is again one of ignorance where there is "no light from the fires." From this chaos the bare outlines of the human form begin to appear:

Many ages of groans, till there grew

Branchy forms organizing the Human

Into finite inflexible organs.

The human senses are pale imitations of the true senses that allow one to perceive eternity. Urizen's world where man now lives is spoken of as an "illusion" because it masks the spiritual world that is everywhere present.

In *The Song of Los*, Los sings of the decayed state of man, where the arbitrary laws of Urizen have become institutionalized:

Thus the terrible race of Los & Enitharmon gave

Laws & Religions to the sons of Har, binding them more

And more to Earth, closing and restraining,

Till a Philosophy of five Senses was complete.

Urizen wept & gave it into the hands of Newton & Locke.

The "philosophy of the five senses" espoused by scientists and philosophers argues that the world and the mind are like industrial machines operating by fixed laws but devoid of imagination, creativity, or any spiritual life. Blake condemns this materialistic view of the world espoused in the writings of Newton and Locke.

Although man is in a fallen state, the end of the poem points to the regeneration that is to come:

Orc, raging in European darkness,

Arose like a pillar of fire above the Alps,

Like a serpent of fiery flame!

The coming of Orc is likened not only to the fires of revolution sweeping Europe, but also to the final apocalypse when the "Grave shrieks with delight."

The separation of man is also examined in *The Book of Ahania*, which Blake later incorporated in *Vala, or The Four Zoas*. In *The Book of Ahania* Urizen is further divided into male and female forms. Urizen is repulsed by his feminine shadow that is called Ahania:

He groan'd anguish'd, & called her Sin,

Kissing her and weeping over her;

Then hid her in darkness, in silence,

Jealous, tho' she was invisible.

Blake satirizes the biblical and Miltonic associations of sin and lust. "Ahania" in Blake's poem is only a "sin" in that she is given that name. Urizen, the lawgiver, can not accept the liberating aspects of sexual pleasure. At the end of the poem, Ahania laments the lost pleasures of eternity:

"Where is my golden palace?

Where my ivory bed?

Where the joy of my morning hour?

Where the sons of eternity singing."

The physical pleasures of sexual union are celebrated as an entrance to a spiritual state. The physical union of man and woman is sign of the spiritual union that is to come.

At the same time as he was writing these individual poems that center on aspects of man's fall, Blake was also composing an epic poem on the fall of man into separate identities. Blake originally called the poem *Vala* and later changed the name to *The Four Zoas*. He worked on the poem for a number of years but never completed it. It survives in manuscript form with rough designs for illustrations, but it never became one of the "illuminated books."

*The Four Zoas* is subtitled "The Torments of Love and Jealousy in the Death and Judgement of Albion the Ancient Man," and the poem develops Blake's myth of Albion, who represents both the country of England and the unification of all men. Albion is composed of "Four Mighty Ones": Tharmas, Urthona, Urizen, and Luvah. Originally, in "Eden," these four exist in the unity of "The Universal Brotherhood." At this early time all parts of man lived in perfect harmony, but now they are fallen into warring camps. The poem traces the changes in Albion:

His fall into Division & his Resurrection to Unity:

His fall into the Generation of decay & death, & his

Regeneration by the Resurrection from the dead.

The poem begins with Tharmas and examines the fall of each aspect of man's identity. The poem progresses from disunity toward unity as each Zoa moves toward final unification.

In the apocalyptic "Night the Ninth," the evils of oppression are overturned in the turmoil of the Last Judgment:

The thrones of Kings are shaken, they have lost their robes & crowns

The poor smite their oppressors, they awake up to the harvest.

The final overthrow of all kings and tyrants that earthly revolutions tried but failed to achieve will be accomplished on the last day. The "harvest" imagery is from the Book of Revelations and represents the process of gathering and discarding that marks the progress of man's soul on the last day.

As dead men are rejuvenated, Christ, the "Lamb of God," is brought back to life and sheds the evils of institutionalized religions:

Thus shall the male & female live the life of Eternity,

Because the Lamb of God Creates himself a bride & wife

That we his Children evermore may live in Jerusalem

Which now descendeth out of heaven, a City, yet a Woman

Mother of myriads redeem'd & born in her spiritual palaces,

By a New Spiritual birth Regenerated from Death.

The heavenly City of Jerusalem is the true form of God's church. The earthly city of Jerusalem and the numerous forms of religions are but pale imitations of that true religion where God and the church are joined. In that City man's separate identities are reunited, and man is reunited with God.

Very little of Blake's poetry of the 1790s was known to the general public. His reputation as an artist was mixed. Response to his art ranged from praise to derision, but he did gain some fame as an engraver. He received several commissions, the most important probably being his illustrations to Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*. In 1795 the publisher and bookseller Richard Edwards commissioned Blake to illustrate the then-famous poems of Young. Blake produced 537 watercolor designs of which 43 were selected for engraving. The first volume of a projected four-volume series was published in 1797. However, the project did not prove financially successful, and no further volumes were published. After the disappointment of that project, Blake's friend and admirer Flaxman commissioned Blake to illustrate the poems of [Thomas Gray](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=2688). Blake painted 116 watercolors and completed the project in 1798. Blake was also aided by his friend Thomas Butts, who commissioned a series of biblical paintings. His commissions did not produce much in the way of income, but Blake never seems to have been discouraged. In 1799 Blake wrote to George Cumberland, "I laugh at Fortune & Go on & on."

Because of his monetary woes, Blake often had to depend on the benevolence of patrons of the arts. This sometimes led to heated exchanges between the independent artist and the wealthy patron. Dr. John Trusler was one such patron whom Blake failed to please. Dr. Trusler was something of a dabbler in a variety of fields. Aside from being a clergyman, he was a student of medicine, a bookseller, and the author of such works as *Hogarth Moralized* (1768), *The Way to be Rich and Respectable*(1750?), and *A Sure Way to Lengthen Life with Vigor* (circa 1819). Blake's friend Cumberland had recommended Blake to Trusler in hopes of providing some needed income for Blake. Blake, however, found himself unable to follow the clergyman's wishes: "I attempted every morning for a fortnight together to follow your Dictate, but when I found my attempts were in vain, resolv'd to shew an independence which I know will please an Author better than slavishly following the track of another, however admirable that track may be. At any rate, my Excuse must be: I could not do otherwise; it was out of my power!" Dr. Trusler was not convinced and replied that he found Blake's "Fancy" to be located in the "World of Spirits" and not in this world.

Blake's rebuttal is a classic defense of his own principles. To the charge that Blake needed someone to "elucidate" his idea, Blake replied with characteristic wrath: "That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients consider'd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouzes the faculities to act." Blake relies on a basic principle of rhetoric that is evident in his writing: it is often best to leave some things unsaid so that the reader must employ his imagination. To the charge that his visions were not of this world, Blake replied that he had seen his visions in this world, but not all men see alike: "As a man is, So he Sees. As the Eye is formed, such are its Powers. You certainly Mistake, when you say that the Visions of Fancy are not to be found in This World. To Me This World is all One continued Vision of Fancy or Imagination." The problem then is not the location of Blake's subjects, but the relative ability of man to perceive. If Dr. Trusler could not understand Blake's drawings, the problem was his inability to see with the imagination.

Dr. Trusler was not the only patron that tried to make Blake conform to popular tastes. Blake's stormy relation to his erstwhile friend and patron William Hayley directly affected the writing of the epics *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. When Blake met him Hayley was a well-known man of letters who had produced several popular volumes of poetry. His *Triumphs of Temper* (1781), which admonishes women to control their tempers in order to be good wives, was very popular. In 1800 under Hayley's promptings Blake moved from London to the village of Felpham, where Hayley lived. It was expected that Blake would receive numerous engraving commissions, and his financial problems would disappear.

Hayley did provide Blake with some small commissions. Blake began work on a series of eighteen "Heads of the Poets" for Hayley's library and worked on the engravings for Hayley's *Life of Cowper* (1802). Hayley also set Blake to work on a series of small portraits, but Blake soon bristled under the watchful eye of his patron. In January of 1803 Blake wrote to Butts that "I find on all hands great objections to my doing anything but the meer drudgery of business, & intimations that if I do not confine myself to this, I shall not live; this has always pursu'd me." In the same letter Blake argued that his duty to his art must take precedence to the necessity of making money: "But if we fear to do the dictates of our Angels, & tremble at the Tasks set before us; if we refuse to do Spiritual Acts because of natural Fears of natural Desires! Who can describe the dismal torments of such a state!"

The "Spiritual Acts" Blake referred to include the writing of his epic poetry despite Hayley's objections. In the same month Blake wrote to his brother James that he is determined "To leave This Place" and that he can no longer accept Hayley's patronage: "The truth is, As a Poet he is frighten'd at me & as a Painter his view & mine are opposite; he thinks to turn me into a Portrait Painter as he did Poor Romney, but this he nor all the devils in hell will never do."

Blake left Felpham in 1803 and returned to London. In April of that year he wrote to Butts that he was overjoyed to return to the city: "That I can alone carry on my visionary studies in London unannoy'd, & that I may converse with my friends in Eternity, See Visions, Dream Dreams & Prophecy & Speak Parables unobserv'd & at liberty from the Doubts of other Mortals." In the same letter Blake refers to his epic poem *Milton*, composed while at Felpham: "But none can know the Spiritual Acts of my three years' Slumber on the banks of the Ocean, unless he has seen them in the Spirit, or unless he should read My long Poem descriptive of those Acts."

In a later letter to Butts, Blake declares his resolution to have *Milto*

printed:

This Poem shall, by Divine Assistance be progressively Printed & Ornamented with Prints & given to the Public. But of this work I take care to say little to Mr H., since he is as much averse to my poetry as he is to a Chapter in the Bible. He knows that I have writ it, for I have shewn it to him, & he has read Part by his own desire & has looked with sufficient contempt to inhance my opinion of it. But I do not wish to irritate by seeming too obstinate in Poetic pursuits. But if all the World should set their faces against This, I have Orders to set my face like flint (Ezekiel iiiC, 9v) against their faces, & my forehead against their foreheads.

Blake's letter reveals much of his attitude toward his patron and toward his readers. Blake believed that his poetry could be read and understood by the general public, but he was determined not to sacrifice his vision in order to become popular. Men of letters such as Hayley would not be allowed to dictate his art. Blake compares himself to the prophet Ezekiel, whom the Lord made strong to warn the Israelites of their wickedness. Blake's images of a stern prophet locked head to head with his adversary is a fitting picture of part of Blake's relation with his reader. Blake knew that his poetry would be derided by some readers. In *Milton* Blake tells us that "the idiot reasoner laughs at the Man of Imagination," and in the face of that laughter Blake remained resolute.

In his "slumber on the banks of the Ocean," Blake, surrounded by financial worries and hounded by a patron who could not appreciate his art, reflected on the value of visionary poetry. *Milton*, which Blake started to engrave in 1804 (probably finishing in 1808), is a poem that constantly draws attention to itself as a work of literature. Its ostensible subject is the poet [John Milton](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=4771), but the author, William Blake, also creates a character for himself in his own poem. Blake examines the entire range of mental activity involved in the art of poetry from the initial inspiration of the poet to the reception of his vision by the reader of the poem. *Milton* examines as part of its subject the very nature of poetry: what it means to be a poet, what a poem is, and what it means to be a reader of poetry.

In the preface to the poem, Blake issues a battle cry to his readers to reject what is merely fashionable in art:

Rouze up, O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court & the University, who would, if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War. Painters! on you I call. Sculptors! Architects! suffer not the fashionable Fools to depress your powers by the prices they pretend to give for contemptible works, or the expensive advertizing boasts that they make of such works; believe Christ & his Apostles that there is a Class of men whose whole delight is in Destroying. We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever in Jesus our Lord.

In attacking the "ignorant Hirelings" in the "Camp, the Court & the University," Blake repeats a familiar dissenting cry against established figures in English society. Blake's insistence on being "just & true to our own Imaginations" places a special burden on the reader of his poem. For as he makes clear, Blake demands the exercise of the creative imagination from his own readers.

In the well-known lyric that follows, Blake asks for a continuation of Christ's vision in modern-day England:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,

Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand

Till we have built Jerusalem

In England's green & pleasant Land.

The poet-prophet must lead the reader away from man's fallen state and toward a revitalized state where man can perceive eternity.

"Book the First" contains a poem-within-a-poem, a "Bard's Prophetic Song." The Bard's Song describes man's fall from a state of vision. We see man's fall in the ruined form of Albion as a representative of all men and in the fall of Palamabron from his proper position as prophet to a nation. Interwoven into this narrative are the Bard's addresses to the reader, challenges to the reader's senses, descriptions of contemporary events and locations in England, and references to the life of William Blake. Blake is at pains to show us that his mythology is not something far removed from us but is part of our day to day life. Blake describes the reader's own fall from vision and the possibility of regaining those faculties necessary for vision.

The climax of the Bard's Song is the Bard's sudden vision of the "Holy Lamb of God": "Glory! Glory! to the Holy lamb of God: / I touch the heavens as an instrument to glorify the Lord." The vision of the "Lamb of God" is traditional in apocalyptic literature. In this case the Bard's final burst of vision is important not only for its content, but also for its placement in the poem. The Bard's sudden vision of the Lamb of God testifies that man need not remain "in chains of the mind Lock'd up." The Bard begins by describing the fall from vision, but he ends with a vision of his own that indicates that man still possesses the powers of vision.

At the end of the Bard's Song, the Bard's power of vision is questioned much as Blake's prophecies were criticized. The Bard's spirit is incorporated into that of the poet Milton. Blake portrays Milton as a great but flawed poet who must unify the separated elements of his own identity before he can reclaim his powers of vision and become a true poet. Upon hearing the Bard's Song, Milton is moved to descend to earth and begin the process of becoming an inspired poet. It is a journey of intense self-discovery and self-examination that requires Milton to cast off "all that is not inspiration."

As Milton is presented as a man in the process of becoming a poet, Blake presents himself as a character in the poem undergoing the transformation necessary to become a poet. As Milton is inspired by the "Bard's Song," Blake is inspired by the spirit of Milton:

Then first I saw him in the Zenith as a falling star

Descending perpendicular, swift as the swallow or swift:

And on my left foot falling on the tarsus, enter'd there

But from my left foot a black cloud redounding spread over Europe.

This sudden moment of inspiration extends to the very end of book one. Like Saul on the road to Damascus, the character Blake is not fully aware of the importance of this moment of illumination. Like Milton, Blake is in the process of becoming a poet.

In a moment of sudden inspiration, Blake overcomes his "earthly lineaments" and binds "this Vegetable World" as a sandal under his foot so that he can "walk forward thro' Eternity." Blake's act of creativity enables him to merge with Los:

And I became One Man with him arising in my strength

'Twas too late now to recede. Los had enter'd into my soul:

His terrors now possess'd me whole! I arose in fury & strength!

Blake's act of faith in the world of the imagination enables him to increase his powers of perception and sets a pattern for the reader to follow. Blake's union with Los marks the end of one stage of the unification process that began at the completion of the Bard's Song. In each case faith in the power of the imagination precedes union.

Only Milton believes in the vision of the Bard's Song, and the Bard takes "refuge in Milton's bosom." As Blake realizes the insignificance of this "Vegetable World," Los merges with Blake, and he arises in "fury and strength." This ongoing belief in the hidden powers of the mind heals divisions and increases powers of perception. The Bard, Milton, Los, and Blake begin to merge into a powerful bardic union. Yet it is but one stage in a greater drive toward the unification of all men in a "Universal Brotherhood."

In the second book of *Milton* Blake initiates the reader into the order of poets and prophets. Blake continues the process begun in book one of taking the reader through different stages in the growth of a poet. Ololon, Milton's female form, descends to earth to unite with Milton. Her descent gives the reader a radically new view of this world. Ololon's unique perspective turns the reader's world of time and space upside down to make him see the decayed and limited nature of this world. If he can learn to see his familiar world from a new perspective, then the reader can develop his own powers of perception. Indeed "learning to see" is the first requirement of the poet.

The turning of the outside world upside down is a preliminary stage in an extensive examination of man's internal world. A searching inquiry into the self is a necessary stage in the development of the poet. Milton is told he must first look within: "Judge then of thy Own Self: thy Eternal Lineaments explore, / What is Eternal & what Changeable, & what Annihilable." Milton descends within himself and judges the separate parts of his own identity; he must distinguish between what is permanent and what transitory. Central to the process of judging the self is a confrontation with that destructive part of man's identity Blake calls the Selfhood. The Selfhood continually hinders man's spiritual development. Only by annihilating the Selfhood, Blake believes, can one hope to participate in the visionary experience of the poem. Unless the Selfhood is annihilated, one cannot become a true poet, for the Selfhood continually blocks "the human center of creativity."

The Selfhood places two powerful forces to block our path: the socially accepted values of "love" and "reason." In its purest state love is given freely with no restrictions and no thought of return. In its fallen state love is reduced to a form of trade: "Thy love depends on him thou lovest, & on his dear loves / Depend thy pleasures, which thou hast cut off by jealousy." "Female love" is given only in exchange for love received. It is bartering in human emotions and is not love at all. When Milton denounces his own Selfhood, he gives up "Female love" and loves freely and openly.

As Blake attacks accepted notions of love, he also forces the reader to question the value society places on reason. The Seven Angels of the Presence warn that the "memory is a state Always, & the Reason is a State / Created to be Annihilated & a new Ratio Created." Both Memory and Reason exercise the lesser powers of the mind. Nothing new can be created by the mental processes involved in memory and reason. In his struggle with Urizen, who represents man's limited power of reason, Milton seeks to cast off the deadening effect of the reasoning power and free the mind for the power of the imagination. Milton gains control of Urizen, and it is clear that in Milton's mind it is now the imagination that directs reason.

Destroying the Selfhood allows Milton to unite with others. He descends upon Blake's path and continues the process of uniting with Blake that had begun in book one. This union is also a reflection of Blake's encounter with Los that is described in book one and illustrated in book two. As was the case with seeing Los, Blake is startled by Milton's arrival. Los appears as a "terrible flaming Sun," and Milton's arrival turns Blake's path into a "solid fire, as bright as the Clear Sun." Both events describe the process of union and the assumption of the powers of the imagination necessary to become a true poet. All of this comes about through the individual annihilation of the Selfhood. To become a poet and prophet, the man of imagination must first look within and destroy the Selfhood.

Milton's final speech in praise of the virtue of self-annihilation is followed by Ololon's own annihilation of the Selfhood. She rejects her virgin Selfhood and joins with Milton:

Then as a Moony Ark Ololon descended to Felpham's Vale

In clouds of blood, in streams of gore, with dreadful thunderings

Into the fires of Intellect that rejoic'd in Felpham's Vale

Around the Starry Eight; with one accord the Starry Eight became

One Man, Jesus the Savior, wonderful!

As Noah's Ark saved lives upon earth, the "Moony Ark" of Ololon preserves man's individual nature. The Seven Eyes of God that had instructed Milton are now merged with Milton, Blake, and all men on earth. Jesus is "One Man," for he unites all men in a Universal Brotherhood. By destroying the Selfhood, we do not lose our identity but rather gain a new identity in the body of the universal brotherhood. Our entry into this union prepares us for the promise of vision.

The apex of Blake's vision in Felpham is the brief image of the Throne of God. In Revelation, John's vision of the Throne of God is a prelude to the apocalypse itself. Similarly Blake's vision of the throne is also a prelude to the coming apocalypse. Blake's vision is abruptly cut off as the Four Zoas sound the Four Trumpets, signaling the call to judgment of the peoples of the earth. The trumpets bring to a halt Blake's vision, as he falls to the ground and returns to his mortal state. The apocalypse is still to come.

Blake's falling to the ground is not a mystic swoon, but part of his design to take himself out of the poem and leave it to the reader to continue the vision of the coming apocalypse. The author falls before the vision of the Throne of God and the awful sound of the coming apocalypse. However, the vision of the author does not fall with him to the ground. In the very next line after Blake describes his faint, we see his vision soar: "Immediately the lark mounted with a loud trill from Felpham's Vale." We have seen the lark as the messenger of Los and the carrier of inspiration. Its sudden flight here demonstrates that the vision of the poem does not end but continues. It is up to the reader to follow the flight of the lark to the Gate of Los and continue the vision of *Milton*.

*Milton* does not come to a firm conclusion, for it can only be concluded by the reader. The reader, armed with the creative power of poetry and the power of his own imagination, is asked to continue the work of the poet and prophet.

Before Blake could leave Felpham and return to London, an incident occurred that was very disturbing to him and possibly even dangerous. Without Blake's knowledge, his gardener had invited a soldier by the name of John Scofield into his garden to help with the work. Blake seeing the soldier and thinking he had no business being there promptly tossed him out. In a letter to Butts, Blake recalled the incident in detail:

I desired him, as politely as possible, to go out of the Garden; he made me an impertinent answer. I insisted on his leaving the Garden; he refused. I still persisted in desiring his departure; he then threaten'd to knock out my Eyes, with many abominable imprecations & with some contempt for my Person; it affronted my foolish Pride. I therefore took him by the Elbows & pushed him before me till I had got him out; there I intended to leave him, but he, turning about, put himself into a Posture of Defiance, threatening & swearing at me. I, perhaps foolishly & perhaps not, stepped out at the Gate, & putting aside his blows, took him again by the Elbows, &, keeping his back to me, pushed him forwards down the road about fifty yards--he all the while endeavouring to turn round & strike me, & raging & cursing, which drew out several neighbours....

What made this almost comic incident so serious was that the soldier swore before a magistrate that Blake had said "Damn the King" and had uttered seditious words. Blake denied the charge, but he was forced to post bail and appear in court. Hayley came to Blake's aid by helping to post the bail money and arranging for counsel.

Blake left Felpham at the end of September 1803 and settled in a new residence on South Molton Street in London. His trial was set for the following January at Chichester. Hayley was almost forced to miss the trial because of a fall he suffered while riding his horse, but he was determined to help Blake and appeared in court to testify to the good character of the accused. The soldier's testimony was shown to be false, and the jury acquitted Blake. A local newspaper, the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*(16 January 1804), reported on the acquittal: "After a very long and patient hearing, he was by the Jury acquitted, which so gratified the auditory, that the court was, in defiance of all decency, thrown into an uproar by their noisy exultations."

Blake's radical political views made him sometimes fear persecution, and he wondered if Scofield had been a government agent sent to entrap him. In any event Blake forever damned the soldier by attacking him in the epic poem *Jerusalem*. One positive result of the trial was that Blake was reconciled with Hayley, whose support during the trial was greatly appreciated.

*Jerusalem* is in many ways Blake's major achievement. It is an epic poem consisting of 100 illuminated plates. Blake dated the title page 1804, but he seems to have worked on the poem for a considerable length of time after that date.

In *Jerusalem* Blake develops his mythology to explore man's fall and redemption. As the narrative begins, man is apart from God and split into separate identities. As the poem progresses man's split identities are unified, and man is reunited with the divinity that is within him.

In chapter one Blake announces the purpose of his "great task":

To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes

Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity

Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination.

It is sometimes easy to get lost in the complex mythology of Blake's poetry and forget that he is describing not outside events but a "Mental Fight" that takes place in the mind. Much of *Jerusalem* is devoted to the idea of awakening the human senses, so that the reader can perceive the spiritual world that is everywhere present.

At the beginning of the poem, Jesus addresses the fallen Albion: "'I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend; / 'Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me.'" In his fallen state Albion rejects this close union with God and dismisses Jesus as the "Phantom of the overheated brain!" Driven by jealousy Albion hides his emanation, Jerusalem. Separation from God leads to further separation into countless male and female forms creating endless division and dispute.

Blake describes the fallen state of man by describing the present day. Interwoven into the mythology are references to present-day London. There one finds: "Inspiration deny'd, Genius forbidden by laws of punishment." Instead of inspiration man is driven by the "Reasoning Power" which Blake calls "An Abstract objecting power that Negates everything." It is against this mental error that Los wars: "'I must create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's. / 'I will not Reason & Compare : my business is to Create.'" Like the poet Blake, Los emphasizes the importance of the human imagination. Systems of thought, philosophies or religions, when separated from men, destroy what is human. To put an end to the destructive separation, Los struggles to build "The Great City of Golgonooza." Like a work of art, Golgonooza gives form to abstract ideas. It represents the human form and is composed of bodies of men and women.

In chapter two the "disease of Albion" leads to further separation and decay. As the human body is a limited form of its divine origin, the cities of England are limited representations of the Universal Brotherhood of Man. Fortunately for man, there is "a limit of contraction," and the fall must come to an end.

Caught by the errors of sin and vengeance, Albion gives up hope and dies. The flawed religions of moral law cannot save him: "The Visions of Eternity, by reason of narrowed perceptions, / Are become weak Visions of Time & Space, fix'd into furrows of death." Our limited senses make us think of our lives as bounded by time and space apart from eternity. In such a framework physical death marks the end of existence. But there is also a limit to death, and Albion's body is preserved by the Savior.

The Tyger

BY [WILLIAM BLAKE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-blake)

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,

In the forests of the night;

What immortal hand or eye,

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.

Burnt the fire of thine eyes?

On what wings dare he aspire?

What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,

Could twist the sinews of thy heart?

And when thy heart began to beat,

What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,

In what furnace was thy brain?

What the anvil? what dread grasp,

Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears

And water'd heaven with their tears:

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,

In the forests of the night:

What immortal hand or eye,

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

POET[William Blake](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-blake) 1757–1827

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Romantic](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=18)

SUBJECTS[Philosophy](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=89), [Arts & Sciences](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=88), [Nature](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=42), [Religion](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=67), [Christianity](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=86), [Animals](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=44), [God & the Divine](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=82)

POETIC TERMS[Rhymed Stanza,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)[Couplet](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=20)

The Lamb

BY [WILLIAM BLAKE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-blake)

Little Lamb who made thee

         Dost thou know who made thee

Gave thee life & bid thee feed.

By the stream & o'er the mead;

Gave thee clothing of delight,

Softest clothing wooly bright;

Gave thee such a tender voice,

Making all the vales rejoice!

         Little Lamb who made thee

         Dost thou know who made thee

         Little Lamb I'll tell thee,

         Little Lamb I'll tell thee!

He is called by thy name,

For he calls himself a Lamb:

He is meek & he is mild,

He became a little child:

I a child & thou a lamb,

We are called by his name.

         Little Lamb God bless thee.

         Little Lamb God bless thee.

Source: *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, edited by David E. Erdman* (Anchor Books, 1988)

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HOLIDAYS[Easter](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#holiday=13)

POETIC TERMS[Consonance,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=37)[Refrain,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=43)[Couplet](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=20)

To a Mouse

BY [ROBERT BURNS](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-burns)

*On Turning up in Her Nest with the Plough, November, 1785*

Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim’rous beastie,

O, what a panic’s in thy breastie!

Thou need na start awa sae hasty,

          Wi’ bickerin brattle!

I wad be laith to rin an’ chase thee

          Wi’ murd’ring pattle!

I’m truly sorry Man’s dominion

Has broken Nature’s social union,

An’ justifies that ill opinion,

          Which makes thee startle,

At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,

          An’ fellow-mortal!

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve;

What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!

A daimen-icker in a thrave

          ’S a sma’ request:

I’ll get a blessin wi’ the lave,

          An’ never miss ’t!

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!

It’s silly wa’s the win’s are strewin!

An’ naething, now, to big a new ane,

          O’ foggage green!

An’ bleak December’s winds ensuin,

          Baith snell an’ keen!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an’ waste,

An’ weary Winter comin fast,

An’ cozie here, beneath the blast,

          Thou thought to dwell,

Till crash! the cruel coulter past

          Out thro’ thy cell.

That wee-bit heap o’ leaves an’ stibble

Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!

Now thou’s turn’d out, for a’ thy trouble,

          But house or hald,

To thole the Winter’s sleety dribble,

          An’ cranreuch cauld!

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,

In proving foresight may be vain:

The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men

          Gang aft agley,

An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain,

          For promis’d joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar’d wi’ me!

The present only toucheth thee:

But Och! I backward cast my e’e,

          On prospects drear!

An’ forward tho’ I canna see,

          I guess an’ fear!

POET[Robert Burns](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-burns) 1759–1796

POET’S REGION[Scotland](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=28)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Romantic](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=18)

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POETIC TERMS[Rhymed Stanza](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

1772–1834



Samuel Taylor Coleridge is the premier poet-critic of modern English tradition, distinguished for the scope and influence of his thinking about literature as much as for his innovative verse. Active in the wake of the French Revolution as a dissenting pamphleteer and lay preacher, he inspired a brilliant generation of writers and attracted the patronage of progressive men of the rising middle class. As [William Wordsworth](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-wordsworth)’s collaborator and constant companion in the formative period of their careers as poets, Coleridge participated in the sea change in English verse associated with *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). His poems of this period, speculative, meditative, and strangely oracular, put off early readers but survived the doubts of Wordsworth and Robert Southey to become recognized classics of the romantic idiom.

Coleridge renounced poetic vocation in his thirtieth year and set out to define and defend the art as a practicing critic. His promotion of Wordsworth’s verse, a landmark of English literary response, proceeded in tandem with a general investigation of epistemology and metaphysics. Coleridge was preeminently responsible for importing the new German critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich von Schelling; his associated discussion of imagination remains a fixture of institutional criticism while his occasional notations on language proved seminal for the foundation and development of Cambridge English in the 1920s. In his distinction between culture and civilization Coleridge supplied means for a critique of the utilitarian state, which has been continued in our own time. And in his late theological writing he provided principles for reform in the Church of England. Coleridge’s various and imposing achievement, a cornerstone of modern English culture, remains an incomparable source of informed reflection on the brave new world whose birth pangs he attended.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born on 21 October 1772 in the remote Devon village of Ottery St. Mary, the tenth and youngest child of Ann Bowdon Coleridge and John Coleridge, a school-master and vicar whom he was said to resemble physically as well as mentally. In vivid letters recounting his early years he describes himself as “a genuine Sans culotte, my veins uncontaminated with one drop of Gentility.” The childhood of isolation and self-absorption which Coleridge describes in these letters has more to do, on his own telling, with his position in the family. Feelings of anomie, unworthiness, and incapacity persisted throughout a life of often compulsive dependency on others.

A reader seemingly by instinct, Coleridge grew up surrounded by books at school, at home, and in his aunt’s shop. The dreamy child’s imagination was nourished by his father’s tales of the planets and stars and enlarged by constant reading. Through this, “my mind had been habituated *to the Vast*—& I never regarded *my senses* in any way as the criteria of my belief. I regulated all my creeds by my conceptions not by my*sight*—even at that age.” Romances and fairy tales instilled in him a feeling of “the Great” and “the Whole.” It was a lesson he never forgot. Experience he always regarded as a matter of whole and integrated response, not of particular sensations. Resolving conflicted feelings into whole response occupies much of his best verse, and his developed philosophical synthesis represents a comparable effort of resolution.

A year after the death of his father in 1781 Coleridge was sent to Christ’s Hospital, the London grammar school where he would pass his adolescence training in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, at which he excelled, and in English composition. His basic literary values were formed here under the tutelage of the Reverend James Bowyer, a larger-than-life figure who balanced classical models with native English examples drawn from [Shakespeare](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-shakespeare) and [Milton](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-milton). While Wordsworth was imitating [Thomas Gray](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/thomas-gray) at Hawkshead Grammar School, Coleridge was steeping in this long tradition of distinguished writing, learning to compose on Bowyer’s principles. These included an insistence on sound sense and clear reference in phrase, metaphor, and image: literary embroidery was discouraged. So were conventional similes and stale poetic diction. Coleridge’s later development as a poet may be characterized as an effort to arrive at a natural voice which eschewed such devices. Critical of the rhetorical excesses of the poetry of sensibility which prevailed at the time, he would join forces with Wordsworth in promoting “natural thoughts with natural diction” (*Biographia Literaria*, chapter 1).

[Charles Lamb](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/charles-lamb)’s evocative portrait of “Christ’s Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago” (1820) suggests what a hothouse environment the school was at the time. The student population included boys who went on to important careers in letters, church, and state. Even in such company Coleridge stood out unmistakably: “Come back into memory, like as thou wert in the day-spring of thy fancies, with hope like a fiery column before thee—the dark pillar not yet turned—Samuel Taylor Coleridge—Logician, Metaphysician, Bard!—How have I seen the casual passer through the Cloisters stand still, intranced with admiration (while he weighed the disproportion between the *speech* and the *garb* of the young Mirandula), to hear thee unfold, in thy deep and sweet intonations, the mysteries of Jamblichus, or Plotinus (for even in those years thou waxedst not pale at such philosophic draughts), or reciting Homer in his Greek, or [Pindar](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/pindar)—while the walls of the old Grey Friars re-echoed to the accents of the *inspired charity-boy!*” The opening notes of awe and eventual disappointment are characteristic, but the portrait of the artist as a young prodigy is more disturbing than Lamb admits. The vatic voice was already alive to its social possibilities, the sole resource of an isolated personality.

At Christ’s Hospital, Coleridge acquired an exalted idea of poetry to match this waxing voice. From Bowyer he would learn that “Poetry, even that of the loftiest and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science.” The comparison of poetry and science was an important one, leading to his mature definition of the art as a form of composition whose immediate aim was pleasure while science was concerned first of all with truth. Yet poetry arrived at truth in its own way, and that way was “more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive causes.” The logic of science was derived from pure reason; the logic of poetry depended on human understanding, which was anything but pure. Understanding belonged to the world of sensation, generalization, and language, and through it poetry was committed to ordinary human experience. Hence its tangled condition. The words of the common tongue kept the poet in touch with this common world.

Poetry as living speech, poetry as act of attention: the commitments of Christ’s Hospital encouraged fresh judgment on the state of the art, and on what rang true now. [Pope](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/alexander-pope)’s couplets had begun to sound contrived while the more masculine energies of Shakespeare and Milton were welling up in the imagination of a generation of young writers. In the sonnets of the Reverend [William Lisle Bowles](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-lisle-bowles), the schoolboy Coleridge found a contemporary model whose voice struck him as “tender” yet “manly,” at once “natural and real.” These words are Coleridge’s own, and they describe his aspirations at least as much as they do Bowles’s fulsome versifications. Long after the model had lost its grip on him, he would credit Bowles with drawing him out of a metaphysical daze, restoring him to “the love of nature, and the sense of beauty in forms and sounds.” To the poet in his first flush, Bowles represented the modern possibilities of “the more sustained and elevated style” in English verse.

At Jesus College, Cambridge, where Coleridge matriculated in October 1791, he composed a mass of occasional poetry. Full of the rhetorical machinery of the middling verse of the period, and often cloying in sentiment, these early poems have little in common with the work of 1795 and after, on which his reputation would be founded. They do not even show him developing in the direction of his mature voice. Some of the phrasing of this college phase bears witness to the force of Milton’s example on the student’s impressionable ear. The backward ambience of Cambridge in the 1790s seems to have retarded Coleridge’s muse, setting him to composing an arid (and ungrammatical) prize poem in Greek (in summer 1792), while driving him to escape from “bog and desolation.” Reports of his college life suggest that he was absorbing not only Greek texts but English political pamphlets at this interesting moment. Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) had met the rising sympathy for events in France with questions about the legitimacy and future of the state. Coleridge is said by a Cambridge contemporary to have consumed Burke’s various productions on first publication, reciting them from memory to company at supper. His sympathies were broadly liberal—critical of William Pitt’s government and the slave trade, yet wary of the situation in France. He was active in defense of William Frend, a Unitarian and Fellow of Jesus College who was expelled for publishing a pamphlet advocating *Peace and Union* (1793). This episode marks the beginning of a convergence between politics and poetry in Coleridge’s career which is characteristic and important. For he was never a disinterested observer. His poetry participated in ongoing reactions to events at home and abroad, and he recognized its vocation in this public setting.

On the basis of seemingly contradictory responses, Coleridge has sometimes been depicted as a turncoat who betrayed his original revolutionary sympathies. His poems suggest, and his lay sermons of the period confirm, that his allegiance was always to an ideal of freedom, not to democratic insurgency. The quality of his ambivalence did not prevent his speaking out in situations which damaged his reputation among Burke’s party, his natural constituency. What sort of revolutionary would enlist in the king’s army in this perilous moment? Coleridge did so on 2 December 1793 under an assumed name, fleeing debts and discouragement at college. He was rescued by family and friends after serving locally for some five months. Escape, servitude, and retreat would become a familiar pattern in Coleridge’s life.

*The Fall of Robespierre* was a collaboration undertaken with Southey, whom he met at Oxford in June 1794, while on a walking tour from Cambridge. With Southey he hatched another escape route, a utopian scheme for immigration to America, where a small group was to found a commune on the banks of the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania. The ideals of Pantisocracy, as they called their project, involved shared labor and shared rewards. Servitude in this setting was exalted as “aspheterism,” a Christian selflessness. *“Religious Musings”* envisions the dismal historical world which they hoped to escape, as well as their aspiration:

                                                ‘Tis the sublime of man,
                 Our noontide majesty, to know ourselves
                 Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole!
                 This fraternizes man, this constitutes
                 Our charities and bearings!

Pantisocracy occupied Coleridge’s energies and continued to influence his sense of vocation for some time after the scheme’s collapse in 1795. A communitarian ideal remained essential to his writing, as to the life he now proposed to live.

For he left Cambridge, without taking a degree, in December 1794, in the midst of this communitarian enthusiasm and was soon thrown back on his own resources. In the course of the next year Coleridge delivered a series of lectures on politics and religion in Bristol, where Southey had connections. He considered various journalistic enterprises and made influential friends, including Joseph Cottle, a local publisher, who was interested enough in his poetry to advance him living expenses against copyright. The volume of *Poems on Various Subjects* (including four sonnets by Lamb and part of another by Southey) which Cottle would publish in 1796 represents a rite of passage. Behind him, the young author’s school verse, sonnets, and rambling effusions trace a course of aimless poetasting. Before him, in “[The Eolian Harp](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/183957)” (included in the 1796 volume as “Effusion xxxv”) and in “Religious Musings” (which concluded the volume), something is stirring. The former, addressed to Sara Fricker, whom he married in Bristol on 4 October 1795, looks forward to the conversational line which he would develop and share with Wordsworth. The latter, on which he claimed in a letter to “build all my poetic pretensions,” is an affirmation of Christian principle in troubled times. Both poems are broadly communitarian in aspiration.

Coleridge expanded on “Religious Musings” over the next two years. A section of it was published as “The Present State of Society” in *The Watchman*, a periodical which Coleridge conducted through ten issues (1 March-13 May 1796). Its contents were various, including reports from Parliament, foreign intelligence, and responses to current issues. The loaf was leavened with bits of poetry, some of it the editor’s own.*The Watchman* failed despite Coleridge’s strenuous efforts to enlist subscribers, but it bears witness to his seriousness of purpose. This conjunction was where Coleridge staked his claim. Poetry as a vatic art in the service of a general social revival: the restless England of George III, reeling from the shock of American and French revolutions, was surely prepared to listen. The scientific and political culture which had emerged in the 1770s was gaining force among the dissenters, Unitarians in particular, whom Coleridge cultivated in and around Bristol. They were his constituency and his means of support. He spoke to them in sermons and lectures, through *The Watchman* and also, as he hoped, through his verse.

His move with Sara to Clevedon, Somersetshire, along the Bristol Channel, in October 1795 was a change of air though not of social context. From here he continued his attack on the king and his ministers, returning occasionally to Bristol to lecture or walking to Bridgwater to speak at the Unitarian chapel. At his cottage he wrote “The Eolian Harp,” a meditative poem different in every way from “Religious Musings” and the real inauguration of his mature voice. In its primitive form, as the effusion of 1796, it reflects the conflict between natural response—“the sense of beauty in forms and sounds,” as he put it in the *Biographia Literaria*—and higher responsibility. Nature as an animated, omnipresent life force, a benevolent companion, is memorably characterized through the image of the wind harp, which is identified with the poet’s “indolent and passive brain.” Poetic imagination is simply an instrument of this Nature, one “organic harp” among others in its universal symphony. In the exemplary setting of the new life he was undertaking, the claims of enlightenment thinking succumbed to faith.

“The Eolian Harp”establishes the terms of this important conflict, which was not simply intellectual but broadly social in implication. For pantheism was associated with the progressive scientific culture for which the empirical world of nature was simply reality itself. A personal God had no empirical reality. Unitarians and various sorts of deists adhered to a divinity which was known through sensation: a Nature god of sorts. This was Coleridge’s intellectual milieu, and he tried out its ideas in his Bristol period. Yet his enduring commitments showed through. The community espoused in the conclusion of “The Eolian Harp” is not the egalitarian utopia of scientific aspiration, but “the family of Christ.” The ideals of Pantisocracy triumph over the temptations of the new science. In his extensive correspondence of the period Coleridge proclaimed himself a Necessitarian for whom everything had a place in the divine scheme. “The Eolian Harp” shows how the lure of an alternative vision of human experience dominated by sensation could provoke an equal and opposite reaffirmation of first principles to the contrary. A traditional faith was confirmed through temptation.

Community after the collapse of Pantisocracy meant a wife and family, impassioned friendships based on shared concerns, and the company of kindred spirits. Thomas Poole, a prosperous tanner of good family in the tiny Somerset village of Nether Stowey, became Coleridge’s closest associate in the uncertain period following his return to Bristol in 1796. The arduous and ultimately futile enterprise of *The Watchman* led him to seek a steady haven where he might work and write in sympathetic surroundings. Supporting Sara and their newborn son, [Hartley](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/hartley-coleridge) (born September 1796), was a priority: “Literature will always be a secondary Object with me.” There was something desperate in such a resolution, and it proved hard to keep after their move to a small thatched cottage in Nether Stowey at the end of 1796.

“[This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173248),” composed from Poole’s cottage garden the next year, relates to the community which he made there. Poole had proved a loyal friend and steady companion; his patronage was crucial to the success of the resettlement. Wordsworth, whom Coleridge had met in Bristol some time before, came to visit with his sister, [Dorothy](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/dorothy-wordsworth), and they soon occupied a substantial house at Alfoxden, walking distance from Nether Stowey. Charles Lloyd lived at Coleridge’s cottage for a time, providing steady income in exchange for tuition. Lamb, the old friend from Christ’s Hospital, and the youthful Hazlitt joined Cottle and other Bristol connections to make up a real if transient community of socially interested parties. All were writers at least by aspiration; all were involved in the reformation of English values for which “romanticism” has since come to stand. The lives they were leading on the fringes of conventional society would become the subject of their work.

So it was in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” which describes a walk some of them took one day in Coleridge’s absence. The jealous Sara had spilled a pan of boiling milk on his foot, excluding him from the company of Dorothy and William Wordsworth, as well as Charles Lamb, on a jaunt in the surrounding spur of low hills—*combes*, in local parlance—the Quantocks. From his confinement in the garden, he celebrates the pleasures of the natural world as seen from within this harmonious community of like-minded individuals. The detailed evocation of their itinerary marks the apogee of his response to landscape. In the end, the poet’s imagination triumphs over his separation: his bower reveals pleasures of its own; Nature is hospitable to human response. Sensation proves adequate to human need; Nature is a providential resource against isolation. The poem’s conclusion dwells on the joy of companionship in such a world.

Coleridge’s new community was instrumental in bringing him to such feeling, and to such expression. This proved to be the most satisfying arrangement he would ever enjoy. It was the setting of his verse breakthrough, of the annus mirabilis in which most of his enduring poems were written. Here he built on the achievement of Clevedon, writing reflectively about his inner life in a social environment which excited and encouraged the questions he was asking. Was the human place in nature a merely passive one, comparable to the wind harp’s? Was natural beauty sufficient to our moral needs? And more speculatively, what was the meaning of nature conceived as an organ of divine will? How did this bear on our idea of society?

These questions haunt the reflective idiom which he developed in the course of this residence of a year and a half at Nether Stowey, with storm clouds brewing on the horizon. The topographic realism of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” reverts via Wordsworth’s *An Evening Walk* (1793) to James Thomson and *The Seasons* (1730), but the voice at work here is that of “a man speaking to men,” in the parlance of the “Preface” to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Speech replaces stale poetic convention from the start. The character of the poet lies at the center of the exercise. The self-consciousness of Wordsworth’s poetically premature ramble is turned to good effect in Coleridge’s effort at something true to the occasion. The sense of occasion is conveyed in fresh blank verse, not the rattling heroic couplets of Wordsworth’s first extended production. The prickly personifications and moralizing eye of “An Evening Walk” are vestigially present in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” but the effect is not of conventional chatter. Coleridge’s diction is clear and direct for the most part, his apostrophes natural to the drama of the situation which he develops.

Walking was more than recreation for the writers’ colony in the Quantocks. It provided the fresh air which their assumptions required. If Nature were to be their muse, and the source of their living values, it would have to be observed in all its sorts and conditions. Coleridge’s plan for an expansive treatment in verse of the course of a brook from source to river shows how his walks in the nearby combes contributed to his reflection on the human condition. “The Brook” as he conceived it would mix “description and incident” with “impassioned reflection on men, nature, society.” He traced a local stream to its wellsprings, recording occasional images in his notebook, but these are all that survive of an ambitious and characteristic project of the period.

Wordsworth’s move to Alfoxden in the summer of 1797 stimulated further projects. At loose ends Coleridge found in Wordsworth a catalyst for his thinking about poetry. The year following his friend’s move to the area would prove to be his most productive, and the beginning of a collaboration which culminated in the *Lyrical Ballads* volume. On his own telling, his conversations with Wordsworth during this year “turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination.” The first point may be described as Wordsworthian, the second as basically Coleridgean. Imagination was already one of his preoccupations; he was interested in [Erasmus Darwin](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/erasmus-darwin)’s idea that “the excess of fancy is delirium, of imagination mania.” Extraordinary states of mind, or casts of spirit, color his major poems of this period of innovation, and the effects which he achieved through them have earned enduring recognition.

Most extraordinary of all, in the eyes of later readers, is “[Kubla Khan](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173247),” an opium-induced, orientalizing fantasia of the unconscious. It is important to recognize that Coleridge himself claimed nothing for this production’s “supposed *poetic* merits.” He did not publish it until 1816, under financial pressure as usual and at the urging of[Lord Byron](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/lord-byron), and only as an appendage to the more substantial “[Christabel](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173227),” which Wordsworth had excluded from the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). The poem was not liked even then. As a “psychological curiosity” it was interesting to its author mainly as evidence of a state of extreme imaginative excitement. “Kubla Khan” had nothing to do with the reflective idiom to which Coleridge was committed. It might be verse, but it was not good poetry.

The story of its genesis is one of the prodigies of English literature. In the course of a solitary walk in the combes near the Bristol Channel in the fall of 1797, Coleridge took two grains of opium for the dysentery which had been bothering him for some time. He retired to an old stone farmhouse some distance from Porlock, where he fell asleep while reading an old travel book, *Purchase His Pilgrimage* (1613), by Samuel Purchase. He awoke hours later to record the extraordinary train of images which arose during his opiated stupor. The act of composition was interrupted by a “person from Porlock”—often conjured by later poets as a figure of life intruding on art—and it proved impossible to continue afterward. Much ink has been spilled over these circumstances, but their oddity makes them generally plausible, even considering Coleridge’s habits of prevarication.

If they are significant at all it is because they epitomize his reputation as the truant phantast of romantic legend. He did much to encourage it, certainly, but he lived to regret what his friends made of him and to defend himself against charges of idleness and premature decay. The Coleridge phenomenon, as it might be called, has been recounted in every literary generation, usually with the emphasis on wonder rather than disappointment, though sometimes—among moralizing critics, never among poets—with a venom which recalls the disillusionment of his associates. Henry James’s story, “The Coxon Fund” (1895), based on table talk of the genius who became a nuisance, is indicative of both attitudes. The Coleridge phenomenon has distorted Coleridge’s real achievement, which was unique in scope and aspiration if all too human in its fits and starts.

The compelling imagery of “Kubla Khan” might be regarded as preparation for “[The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173253),” conceived soon after on a walk to the port of Watchet on the Bristol Channel in the company of Wordsworth and his sister. Some time before, John Cruikshank, a local acquaintance of Coleridge’s, had related a dream about a skeleton ship manned by spectral sailors. This became the germ of a momentous project in which Wordsworth acted as collaborator. The plot was hatched on the walk, according to Wordsworth’s own later recollections, and it was he who conceived of the tale of crime and punishment which Coleridge would treat, in Christian terms, as a story of transgression, penitence, and atonement. Wordsworth also claimed to have suggested that the Old Navigator, as Coleridge initially called him, kill an albatross and be set upon by the “tutelary spirits” of Cape Horn, where the deed is done. He contributed some few lines of verse to the poem in addition.

The collaboration on “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is interesting on several counts. It underlines the collective enterprise involved in the inauguration of the new poetic idiom which would eventually be called [Romantic](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/Romanticism). Creation of this kind is more than a matter of oracular power. It has much to do with rational inquiry and exchange. Further, the episode gives some idea of the working relations between Coleridge and Wordsworth at the moment when the scheme for *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) was being hatched. Their constant companionship on walks, at Alfoxden and elsewhere, gave rise to extended discussion of poetry present and past. Both proved open to suggestion; both grew as poets through their conversations. Most of what is known of this process is known through the *Lyrical Ballads*volume and its later “Preface.” The conclusions which it expresses, in Wordsworth’s voice more than Coleridge’s, have long been seen as foundations of modern poetry.

The genesis of the “Ancient Mariner” is more than the story of one poem. It is the story of a project. In Coleridge’s own account of events, they decided on two sorts of poems for *Lyrical Ballads*: “In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency.”

*Lyrical Ballads* was deliberately experimental, as the authors insisted from the start. The “Ancient Mariner” pointed the way. The fact that it was a collaboration meant that both authors took responsibility for the design of the experiment. This was more than a volume of poems from various hands. The largely negative reviews which it excited on publication concentrated on the “Ancient Mariner,” in part because it was the most substantial poem in the collection, but also because of its self-consciously archaic diction and incredible plot. Southey described it in a dismissive (and anonymous) review as “a Dutch attempt at German sublimity.” Elsewhere it was reckoned “the strangest story of a cock and a bull that we ever saw on paper.” The character of the Mariner also caused confusion.

Despite the problems, the poem flourished on the basis of strong local effects—of its pictures of the “land of ice and snow” and of the ghastly ship in the doldrums, in association with a drumming ballad meter. Wordsworth frankly disliked it after the reviews came in, but Lamb led the way in appreciating its odd mix of romance and realism. It is perhaps as a poem of pure imagination, in the words of [Robert Penn Warren](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-penn-warren)’s landmark reading, that the “Ancient Mariner” has appealed. In this respect among others it bears comparison with “Kubla Khan”; they are usually classified, with*Christabel*, as poems of the supernatural. All answer to the formula proposed for Coleridge’s contributions to *Lyrical Ballads:* supernatural, or at least preternatural, phenomena dignified by association with a human voice. For most readers this is the line of Coleridge’s verse that has mattered. Whatever their liabilities of dramatic construction, the highly charged imagery of these poems has made a strong impression. Its influence rings clear in [Shelley](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/percy-bysshe-shelley) and [Keats](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-keats) in the next generation, and in[Tennyson](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/alfred-tennyson), [Browning](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-browning), [Rossetti](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/dante-gabriel-rossetti), and [Swinburne](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/algernon-charles-swinburne) among their Victorian inheritors. In the title of [W. H. Auden](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/w-h-auden)[’](http://galenet.galegroup.com.flagship.luc.edu/servlet/GLD/hits?r=d&origSearch=true&o=DataType&n=10&l=d&h=DLBBIO02365&c=1&locID=loyolau&secondary=false&u=CA&u=DLB&t=KW&s=1&NA=coleridge)s *Look, Stranger!* (1936) the echo of the Mariner’s exhortation, “Listen, Stranger!,” from the text of 1798, shows how far Coleridge’s oracular voice would carry.

Coleridge’s contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads* volume included a short piece from*Osorio* called “The Foster-Mother’s Tale,” and a meditative poem in blank verse, “The Nightingale,” as well as “The Ancient Mariner.” The collaboration with Wordsworth is perhaps most striking in their development of the conversational idiom for which the subtitle of “The Nightingale, A Conversation Poem, Written in April, 1798” provided a name. It was not the first of the conversation poems; these are considered to begin from “The Eolian Harp” and to include*“*Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement’’ and “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” among his earlier meditative verses. Coleridge himself never distinguished them in this way, nor has Wordsworth’s poetry of the kind ever been described as conversational. Yet the term has come to stand for Coleridge’s decisive innovation as a poet and for his contribution to the formation of Wordsworth’s voice.

It was at this moment of intense exchange that Coleridge wrote his most imposing conversational verse, and that Wordsworth wrote “Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” his startling initiation in the conversational idiom. Wordsworth’s poem stands at the end of *Lyrical Ballads* rather as the “Ancient Mariner” stands at the beginning. It stands out, a monument to the realized achievement of the experiment. From the title, with its particularity about time and place, and the graceful discursive manner, through the association of ideas and the praise of Nature to the address in the concluding stanza to his sister, this poem is virtually a homage to Coleridge’s conversational manner. What Wordsworth would make of the conversation poem is the story of the most distinguished poetic career of the period.

Their achievement in the developing conversational line has seemed more momentous in retrospect than it did at the time. “Tintern Abbey” was noticed only fitfully in early reviews. Yet the example of the conversation poems took where it mattered most, among the poets of the next generation and every generation since. Shelley’s “Julian and Maddalo” (1818) represents an early effort to expand on the possibilities of conversational verse. [Matthew Arnold](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/matthew-arnold) and [T. S. Eliot](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/t-s-eliot) in England and [Robert Frost](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-frost) in America elaborated variously on the conversational convention. The testimony of[Charles Tomlinson](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/charles-tomlinson) shows how the influence of Coleridge’s innovation has been transmitted by modern writers: “The distinguishable American presences in my own work, so far as I can tell, were, up to then, [Pound](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/ezra-pound), [Stevens](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/wallace-stevens), and [Marianne Moore](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/marianne-moore), and yet, if through them the tonality sounded American, the tradition of the work went back to Coleridge’s conversation poems.” The meditative verse of [Geoffrey Hill](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/geoffrey-hill) in the same postwar generation rings changes on the Coleridgean originals of this line of modern verse.

Wordsworth made the conversation poem the vehicle of his celebration of enlightenment values: of nature as spiritual home, of man as the measure of things. Coleridge’s conversational verse points in the same direction under the influence of his great friend, yet it is deeply conflicted under the surface. The conviction of a benevolent nature is compromised by mounting fears. In the earlier poems of the kind these are indicated only indirectly. In “[Frost at Midnight](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173242),” composed from the front room of the Lime Street cottage in the winter of 1798, the poet’s isolation drives him to test the resources of nature conceived as a mediating agent. The poem dramatizes Coleridge’s sense of vulnerability in the face of a threatening outside world. Part of this feeling must have come from the growing hostility of the community in which he was living. Fear of a French invasion was widespread, and the outsiders were suspected of democratic sympathies, even of collusion with the national enemy. Walking home from Bristol, Coleridge heard himself described as a “vile Jacobin villain.” The spy sent by the government found nothing much to report against him, but there was open mistrust of his motives and way of life. Such testimony provides incidental evidence of social pressures which Coleridge expressed in “Frost at Midnight”in an intensely personal way.

“Frost at Midnight” is the most psychodramatic of Coleridge’s conversation poems even if the conclusion is not really consistent with the imaginative process which gives rise to it. For it exposes the deep fears behind the passion for Nature conceived in this way, as an intentional agent and life companion. “Religious meanings in the forms of nature” practically defines the idea as Coleridge understood it. In “Fears in Solitude,” written soon after, and the source of this fine characterization, the sense of danger and vulnerability is directly related to political apprehensions. “Fears in Solitude” shows Coleridge trying to associate the scenery around Nether Stowey with feelings for his country without giving way to the government which he despised. It is an uncertain performance, rambling and disjointed, yet interesting as a portrait of political conviction under pressure.

Despite the difficulties, this was a time of rare promise for the young writer. Wordsworth’s presence was catalytic. It was through the *Lyrical Ballads* volume that Coleridge’s voices, conversational and “romantic,” were developed and rationalized. Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal of 1798 shows how collaborative were all of their undertakings of this formative moment. Yet their auspicious beginning was to prove the beginning of the end of Coleridge’s poetic powers. While Wordsworth would carry on with the experiment for some ten years after that spring in the Quantocks, his companion in the art was all but finished with it. Reasons for the divergence are bound to be conjectures after the fact, but two at least remain worth considering. The collaboration turned out to be a struggle for poetic primacy, and Wordsworth’s personal domination eventually meant loss of conviction—and loss of face—for his troubled colleague. There was room for only one strong voice of this kind. Coleridge was drawn to other roles in any case, and to other causes. Poetry was his means, not his vocation.

What was his vocation then? He is usually described as a man of letters—as the prototype of the modern writer who lives from his earnings as journalist, book reviewer, and jack of all literary trades. Coleridge was provided, quite unexpectedly, a life annuity of 150 pounds sterling by Josiah and Thomas Wedgwood, heirs to the pottery and friends of reliable standing. There were no strings attached. The point was to free him of the routine material difficulties which were already closing in on him from all sides. This was a godsend, but it also put Coleridge on his mettle. For he was now faced with the imperative to choose and define a vocation for himself. Freedom imposes its own obligations, and patronage remains patronage even without the strings. The imminent departure of the Wordsworths, whose one-year lease at Alfoxden was not renewed in June 1798 due to local doubts about their character, precipitated a personal crisis of sorts. The upshot was an extended residence in Germany, separation from family and friends in Nether Stowey, and a change of direction.

Coleridge was drawn to Germany for its literary ferment and new learning. His residence of some months at the university in Göttingen exposed him to the earlier Germanic languages and literatures and also to the new scriptural criticism which would change the face of modern theology. He read Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing rather than [Johann Wolfgang von Goethe](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/johann-wolfgang-von-goethe); enlightenment thinking—not *Sturm und Drang*—was the object lesson. Germany opened doors whose existence he had hardly imagined. It was here that he learned the language sufficiently to approach the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, which consumed his thinking from about 1800. Göttingen supplied a working idea of language which he would turn to his own uses on his return. And it involved him in historical inquiries—on the origin of the free farming class, for example—which he communicated to his correspondents at home. The impression left by his notebooks and letters of this period of residence abroad is of unusual intellectual attentiveness.

The intellectual turn is what distinguishes Coleridge from others, including his friends William Hazlitt and Lamb, whose activity as writers in the period was more clearly in the native grain. His example was followed by De Quincey and Carlyle with differing emphases; “men of letters” would appear less apt to their cases than “literary intellectuals,” with the stress on fresh thinking. Literature, or “polite literature” as Coleridge sometimes called it, included the prose essay for all of them. Verse and prose did not live separate lives; they were distinctive in means but not different in ends as Coleridge explained them. Both gave scope to the same human understanding.

Coleridge rejoined his family in Nether Stowey in midsummer 1799, some time after having returned from Germany. It was an uncomfortable homecoming on several counts. Wordsworth was soon on his way to Dove Cottage at Grasmere in the remote north country, and Coleridge was not far behind. There was trouble with Southey and a difficult leave taking from Thomas Poole. On his way north he tarried in London as political correspondent for the *Morning Post*, writing a brilliant piece on Pitt, the prime minister, showing what his own convictions counted for. For readers interested only in the poetry, such topical work is bound to seem tedious; yet it represents the heart of Coleridge’s commitment in the period when he was writing his best verse. His*Essays on His Own Times* (1850), collected long after in three volumes, show how serious and capable a critic of society he was. The promotion of his most personal and individualistic work by later readers has obscured his constant attention to social arrangements and social ideals.

His move to Keswick in summer 1800 (not long before the birth of his third son, Derwent, on 14 September) represented a kind of retreat from the discouraging world of city politics and city life. The Wedgwood annuity made it feasible, Wordsworth’s presence nearby practically inevitable. *Lyrical Ballads* was to be republished in a new edition; *Christabel* was still unfinished, and here he added the second part, with its altered landscape reflecting the scenery of Langdale Pike and “Borodale.” It was a critical time in his professional transition. Wordsworth’s rejection of the still unfinished poem contributed to Coleridge’s sense of personal incapacity. He came to feel that he was not a poet; not a great poet, at least not like Wordsworth. Yet his valedictory ode, “[Dejection](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173229),” first composed as a letter in 1802, shows him at the peak of his powers. Writing in the shadow of Wordsworth’s “Intimations” ode, Coleridge here cultivated a more colloquial delivery while remaining true to his own muse. This is his magisterial conversation poem, the most compelling (though not the most celebrated) achievement of his foreshortened poetic career.

Coleridge was now on his own as never before, unsettled, constantly ill, searching for a way through his difficulties. He decided at this time on a career as a critic, at first proposing “an Essay on the Elements of Poetry / it would in reality be a *disguised*System of Morals & Politics—.” The real orientation of his poetics is indicated here. It was refined but not fundamentally altered by subsequent reflection and formulation. By 1804 he was calling the same project *“On the Sources of Poetic Pleasure*—in which without using the words bad or good, I simply endeavor to detect the causes & sources of the Pleasures, which different styles &c have given in different ages, & then determining their comparative Worth, Permanency, & Compatibility with the noble parts of our nature to establish in the utmost depths, to which I can delve, the characteristics of Good & Bad Poetry—& the intimate connection of Taste & Morals.—” The lectures delivered at the Royal Institution in 1808 on “The Principles of Poetry” apparently fleshed out this program, beginning from Shakespeare and concluding “On Modern Poetry.” They were the first of several lecture series conducted by Coleridge in the years 1808-1814. Their contents are known mainly from unreliable reports when they are known at all.

The lectures of 1811-1812 on Shakespeare were influential in the general revival of interest in the Elizabethan drama. [Dr. Johnson](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/samuel-johnson)’s 1765 preface to his edition of Shakespeare’s works had defended him as the poet of nature who held up a mirror to life and manners. Against this mimetic emphasis Coleridge lay stress on Shakespeare’s expressive language and the psychological acumen associated with it: “In the plays of Shakespeare, every man sees himself, without knowing that he does so.” A more important legacy of the lectures on Shakespeare is the idea of organicism, which has deep roots in his earlier critical reflection. In lecture notes on Shakespeare, Coleridge evokes organic form in terms which mimic the contemporary German critic August Wilhelm Schlegel. The form of Shakespeare’s dramas grew out of his characters and ideas, on Coleridge’s telling; the old dramatic conventions did not impede the conception. The structural variety of his plays—the seeming irregularities of *The Tempest*, in particular—arose from expressive requirements. Organic form redeemed Shakespeare’s unconventional dramatic constructions.

The importance of the organic metaphor and idea for later thinking about poetry can hardly be exaggerated. The sense of the work of art as an organism, self-germinating and self-enclosed, pervades modern writing and modern criticism. Coleridge’s elaboration on the idea of imagination in this period owes something to the distinction of mechanic and organic form as well. His definitions of primary and secondary imagination and of fancy have become canonical; they served I. A. Richards, notably, as a theoretical basis of the “semasiology” which he proposed in 1935. This putative science of meaning was meant to shore up the foundations of English as an academic discipline and proved influential not only at Cambridge but throughout the English-speaking world, including the United States, where it provided impetus for the development of the New Criticism, as it was called. Treating Coleridge as a provincial outpost of the new German critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, English and American readers have usually abandoned the complex record of his reading and response in favor of one or two manageable ideas. The result has been general misapprehension about his orientation and commitments. Coleridge does not make sense as a model of aesthetic reading despite the efforts of Richards and others to bend him to this purpose.

What sort of reader was he, then? Moral and political, certainly, but something more. On his return from Germany in 1799, Coleridge had undertaken “a metaphysical Investigation” of “the affinities of the Feelings with Words & Ideas,” to be composed “under the title of ‘Concerning Poetry & the nature of the Pleasures derived from it.’” The connection of his philosophical studies with his critical ambition is important for understanding how Coleridge imagined the critical function. He was not interested in judging writing by current standards. Conventional judgments of good or bad relied on unspoken assumptions which he was concerned to test and modify, where appropriate, by the light of reason. Adjudicating taste is the usual purview of the “man of letters.” Coleridge was trying for something more philosophical, of larger scope and bearing: “acting the arbitrator between the old School & the New School to lay down some plain, & perspicuous, tho’ not superficial Canons of Criticism respecting poetry.”

In the wake of the republication of *Lyrical Ballads* in early 1801 (with ‘1800’ on the title page), Coleridge’s critical project became a protracted effort to come to terms with Wordsworth’s radical claims in the “Preface” for a poetry composed “in the real language of men.” This was the “New School” of “natural thoughts in natural diction”: Coleridge’s own school despite his differences with Wordsworth. His effort to make the case for the new verse in the teeth of pitched hostility on the part of reviewers culminated in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), where the “Old School” is treated anecdotally in the opening chapters on the way to the triumph of Wordsworth’s voice. The fifteen years between the “Preface” and *Biographia Literaria*were consumed with working through the critical agenda which Coleridge set himself at the turn of the century. The process was a fitful, often tortuous one. The metaphysical investigation assumed a life of its own, waylaid by deep plunges into Kant and Schelling, among others. It culminates in the first volume of the *Biographia Literaria* with an effort to provide rational ground for the critical exercise which follows in the second. His definition of imagination remains an important part of his poetic legacy, nevertheless, since it underwrites the development of a symbolist aesthetic still associated with his name though at odds with his enduring commitments.

The thoughtful approach to Wordsworth in the second volume represents Coleridge’s understanding of poetry at its best. His account of the *Lyrical Ballads* project challenges some of Wordsworth’s claims in the “Preface” to the second edition in a way which distinguishes the effective from the peculiar in his verse. Readers have often taken Coleridge’s theoretic pronouncements about imagination as constituting his poetics, while the account of Wordsworth’s verse shows him applying more conventional standards in new and thoughtful ways. This discussion of the new school in English poetry includes a detailed treatment of the question of poetic language as raised by Wordsworth, and it is Coleridge’s response to his positions in the *Lyrical Ballads* “Preface” that makes up the real centerpiece of the argument. The defense of poetic diction in particular is important for understanding his idea of poetry. Its roots lie in a long meditation on language, not in a philosophically derived faculty of imagination.

This meditation on language occupied Coleridge occasionally during the years between his return from Germany in 1799 and the composition of the *Biographia Literaria*. Among projects which he undertook during these long years of opium addiction, physical disability, and aimless wandering, *The Friend* (1809) stands out for its originality and influence. After two years away, in Malta, Sicily, and Rome, he returned to Keswick in 1806, separated from his wife (who had given birth to their daughter, Sara, on 23 December 1802), lectured and dilated, and finally settled on publishing “a weekly essay” which ran from 1 June 1809 to 15 March 1810. The publication rose and fell by subscriptions, relying on Coleridge’s name and reputation, and finally collapsed under the weight of his private difficulties. Eclectic in approach, broadly literary in style, its various essays remain worth considering for what they indicate of the evolution of letters in the period. *The Friend* established a high discursive tone which was influential among Coleridge’s inheritors, including Carlyle and [Emerson](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/ralph-waldo-emerson), for whom it was counted among his most valuable works.

In 1812 the Wedgwood annuity was reduced by half due to financial difficulties related to the war. Coleridge continued to wander, staying with friends all over the kingdom and occasionally with his family in Keswick. In 1816 he published *Christabel* with “Kubla Khan” and “The Pains of Sleep” in a single volume; the next year his collected verse, *Sibylline Leaves*, appeared. He moved into the house of Dr. James Gillman, a physician in Highgate, now a north London village, trying to cure or at least to treat his opium problem. Here he would pass the remainder of his life, writing only occasional verse while preparing philosophical lectures (delivered in 1818), revising the text of *The Friend* for publication as a book, and collating the moral and theological aphorisms which appeared as *Aids to Reflection* (1825). These were popular and influential in America as well as in England. Coleridge published a meditation on political inspiration in *The Stateman’s Manual* (1816) among other tracts on subjects theological and political. *On the Constitution of Church and State*appeared in 1830; *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* posthumously in 1840. He planned a comprehensive philosophical synthesis which he was unable to realize, conjuring with a system which lived only in his constantly working mind. The most finished text from among his philosophical papers was published in 1848 as *Hints towards the Formation of a more Comprehensive Theory of Life*. The reconstruction of his abortive synthesis is in progress.

Coleridge died in 1834 after years of personal discomfort and disappointment. A legend in his time, he came to be seen by friends and contemporaries as the genius who failed. The failure was largely relative to early expectations, however, and to hopes defeated by disease and drugs. Despite everything, Coleridge can still be regarded as a groundbreaking and, at his best, a powerful poet of lasting influence. His idea of poetry remains the standard by which others in the English sphere are tried. As a political thinker, and as a Christian apologist, Coleridge proved an inspiration to the important generation after his own. Recent publication of his private notebooks has provided further evidence of the constant ferment and vitality of his inquiring spirit.

Kubla Khan

BY [SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/samuel-taylor-coleridge)

*Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.*

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

   Down to a sunless sea.

So twice five miles of fertile ground

With walls and towers were girdled round;

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,

Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;

And here were forests ancient as the hills,

Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted

Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!

A savage place! as holy and enchanted

As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted

By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,

As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,

A mighty fountain momently was forced:

Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,

Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail:

And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever

It flung up momently the sacred river.

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion

Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,

Then reached the caverns measureless to man,

And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;

And ’mid this tumult Kubla heard from far

Ancestral voices prophesying war!

   The shadow of the dome of pleasure

   Floated midway on the waves;

   Where was heard the mingled measure

   From the fountain and the caves.

It was a miracle of rare device,

A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

   A damsel with a dulcimer

   In a vision once I saw:

   It was an Abyssinian maid

   And on her dulcimer she played,

   Singing of Mount Abora.

   Could I revive within me

   Her symphony and song,

   To such a deep delight ’twould win me,

That with music loud and long,

I would build that dome in air,

That sunny dome! those caves of ice!

And all who heard should see them there,

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

Weave a circle round him thrice,

And close your eyes with holy dread

For he on honey-dew hath fed,

And drunk the milk of Paradise.

POET[Samuel Taylor Coleridge](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/samuel-taylor-coleridge) 1772–1834

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Romantic](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=18)

SUBJECTS[Arts & Sciences](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=88), [War & Conflict](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=59), [Nature](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=42), [Seas, Rivers, & Streams](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=26), [Heroes & Patriotism](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=97),[Social Commentaries](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=61), [Architecture & Design](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=53), [Weather](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=43), [Mythology & Folklore](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=96)

POETIC TERMS[Imagery,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=42)[Allusion,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=39)[Rhymed Stanza,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)[Mixed](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=47)

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (text of 1834)

BY SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

*Argument

How a Ship having passed the Line was driven by storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole; and how from thence she made her course to the tropical Latitude of the Great Pacific Ocean; and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancyent Marinere came back to his own Country.*

**PART I**

It is an ancient Mariner,

And he stoppeth one of three.

'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,

Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?

The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,

And I am next of kin;

The guests are met, the feast is set:

May'st hear the merry din.'

He holds him with his skinny hand,

'There was a ship,' quoth he.

'Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!'

Eftsoons his hand dropt he.

He holds him with his glittering eye—

The Wedding-Guest stood still,

And listens like a three years' child:

The Mariner hath his will.

The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:

He cannot choose but hear;

And thus spake on that ancient man,

The bright-eyed Mariner.

'The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,

Merrily did we drop

Below the kirk, below the hill,

Below the lighthouse top.

The Sun came up upon the left,

Out of the sea came he!

And he shone bright, and on the right

Went down into the sea.

Higher and higher every day,

Till over the mast at noon—'

The Wedding-Guest here beat his breast,

For he heard the loud bassoon.

The bride hath paced into the hall,

Red as a rose is she;

Nodding their heads before her goes

The merry minstrelsy.

The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast,

Yet he cannot choose but hear;

And thus spake on that ancient man,

The bright-eyed Mariner.

And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he

Was tyrannous and strong:

He struck with his o'ertaking wings,

And chased us south along.

With sloping masts and dipping prow,

As who pursued with yell and blow

Still treads the shadow of his foe,

And forward bends his head,

The ship drove fast, loud roared the blast,

And southward aye we fled.

And now there came both mist and snow,

And it grew wondrous cold:

And ice, mast-high, came floating by,

As green as emerald.

And through the drifts the snowy clifts

Did send a dismal sheen:

Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken—

The ice was all between.

The ice was here, the ice was there,

The ice was all around:

It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,

Like noises in a swound!

At length did cross an Albatross,

Thorough the fog it came;

As if it had been a Christian soul,

We hailed it in God's name.

It ate the food it ne'er had eat,

And round and round it flew.

The ice did split with a thunder-fit;

The helmsman steered us through!

And a good south wind sprung up behind;

The Albatross did follow,

And every day, for food or play,

Came to the mariner's hollo!

In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,

It perched for vespers nine;

Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white,

Glimmered the white Moon-shine.'

'God save thee, ancient Mariner!

From the fiends, that plague thee thus!—

Why look'st thou so?'—With my cross-bow

I shot the ALBATROSS.

**PART II**

The Sun now rose upon the right:

Out of the sea came he,

Still hid in mist, and on the left

Went down into the sea.

And the good south wind still blew behind,

But no sweet bird did follow,

Nor any day for food or play

Came to the mariner's hollo!

And I had done a hellish thing,

And it would work 'em woe:

For all averred, I had killed the bird

That made the breeze to blow.

Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,

That made the breeze to blow!

Nor dim nor red, like God's own head,

The glorious Sun uprist:

Then all averred, I had killed the bird

That brought the fog and mist.

'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,

That bring the fog and mist.

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,

The furrow followed free;

We were the first that ever burst

Into that silent sea.

Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,

'Twas sad as sad could be;

And we did speak only to break

The silence of the sea!

All in a hot and copper sky,

The bloody Sun, at noon,

Right up above the mast did stand,

No bigger than the Moon.

Day after day, day after day,

We stuck, nor breath nor motion;

As idle as a painted ship

Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, every where,

And all the boards did shrink;

Water, water, every where,

Nor any drop to drink.

The very deep did rot: O Christ!

That ever this should be!

Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs

Upon the slimy sea.

About, about, in reel and rout

The death-fires danced at night;

The water, like a witch's oils,

Burnt green, and blue and white.

And some in dreams assurèd were

Of the Spirit that plagued us so;

Nine fathom deep he had followed us

From the land of mist and snow.

And every tongue, through utter drought,

Was withered at the root;

We could not speak, no more than if

We had been choked with soot.

Ah! well a-day! what evil looks

Had I from old and young!

Instead of the cross, the Albatross

About my neck was hung.

**PART III**

There passed a weary time. Each throat

Was parched, and glazed each eye.

A weary time! a weary time!

How glazed each weary eye,

When looking westward, I beheld

A something in the sky.

At first it seemed a little speck,

And then it seemed a mist;

It moved and moved, and took at last

A certain shape, I wist.

A speck, a mist, a shape, I wist!

And still it neared and neared:

As if it dodged a water-sprite,

It plunged and tacked and veered.

With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,

We could nor laugh nor wail;

Through utter drought all dumb we stood!

I bit my arm, I sucked the blood,

And cried, A sail! a sail!

With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,

Agape they heard me call:

Gramercy! they for joy did grin,

And all at once their breath drew in.

As they were drinking all.

See! see! (I cried) she tacks no more!

Hither to work us weal;

Without a breeze, without a tide,

She steadies with upright keel!

The western wave was all a-flame.

The day was well nigh done!

Almost upon the western wave

Rested the broad bright Sun;

When that strange shape drove suddenly

Betwixt us and the Sun.

And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,

(Heaven's Mother send us grace!)

As if through a dungeon-grate he peered

With broad and burning face.

Alas! (thought I, and my heart beat loud)

How fast she nears and nears!

Are those *her* sails that glance in the Sun,

Like restless gossameres?

Are those her *ribs* through which the Sun

Did peer, as through a grate?

And is that Woman all her crew?

Is that a DEATH? and are there two?

Is DEATH that woman's mate?

*Her* lips were red, *her* looks were free,

Her locks were yellow as gold:

Her skin was as white as leprosy,

The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,

Who thicks man's blood with cold.

The naked hulk alongside came,

And the twain were casting dice;

'The game is done! I've won! I've won!'

Quoth she, and whistles thrice.

The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out;

At one stride comes the dark;

With far-heard whisper, o'er the sea,

Off shot the spectre-bark.

We listened and looked sideways up!

Fear at my heart, as at a cup,

My life-blood seemed to sip!

The stars were dim, and thick the night,

The steersman's face by his lamp gleamed white;

From the sails the dew did drip—

Till clomb above the eastern bar

The hornèd Moon, with one bright star

Within the nether tip.

One after one, by the star-dogged Moon,

Too quick for groan or sigh,

Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,

And cursed me with his eye.

Four times fifty living men,

(And I heard nor sigh nor groan)

With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,

They dropped down one by one.

The souls did from their bodies fly,—

They fled to bliss or woe!

And every soul, it passed me by,

Like the whizz of my cross-bow!

**PART IV**

'I fear thee, ancient Mariner!

I fear thy skinny hand!

And thou art long, and lank, and brown,

As is the ribbed sea-sand.

I fear thee and thy glittering eye,

And thy skinny hand, so brown.'—

Fear not, fear not, thou Wedding-Guest!

This body dropt not down.

Alone, alone, all, all alone,

Alone on a wide wide sea!

And never a saint took pity on

My soul in agony.

The many men, so beautiful!

And they all dead did lie:

And a thousand thousand slimy things

Lived on; and so did I.

I looked upon the rotting sea,

And drew my eyes away;

I looked upon the rotting deck,

And there the dead men lay.

I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;

But or ever a prayer had gusht,

A wicked whisper came, and made

My heart as dry as dust.

I closed my lids, and kept them close,

And the balls like pulses beat;

For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky

Lay dead like a load on my weary eye,

And the dead were at my feet.

The cold sweat melted from their limbs,

Nor rot nor reek did they:

The look with which they looked on me

Had never passed away.

An orphan's curse would drag to hell

A spirit from on high;

But oh! more horrible than that

Is the curse in a dead man's eye!

Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,

And yet I could not die.

The moving Moon went up the sky,

And no where did abide:

Softly she was going up,

And a star or two beside—

Her beams bemocked the sultry main,

Like April hoar-frost spread;

But where the ship's huge shadow lay,

The charmèd water burnt alway

A still and awful red.

Beyond the shadow of the ship,

I watched the water-snakes:

They moved in tracks of shining white,

And when they reared, the elfish light

Fell off in hoary flakes.

Within the shadow of the ship

I watched their rich attire:

Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,

They coiled and swam; and every track

Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! no tongue

Their beauty might declare:

A spring of love gushed from my heart,

And I blessed them unaware:

Sure my kind saint took pity on me,

And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;

And from my neck so free

The Albatross fell off, and sank

Like lead into the sea.

**PART V**

Oh sleep! it is a gentle thing,

Beloved from pole to pole!

To Mary Queen the praise be given!

She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,

That slid into my soul.

The silly buckets on the deck,

That had so long remained,

I dreamt that they were filled with dew;

And when I awoke, it rained.

My lips were wet, my throat was cold,

My garments all were dank;

Sure I had drunken in my dreams,

And still my body drank.

I moved, and could not feel my limbs:

I was so light—almost

I thought that I had died in sleep,

And was a blessed ghost.

And soon I heard a roaring wind:

It did not come anear;

But with its sound it shook the sails,

That were so thin and sere.

The upper air burst into life!

And a hundred fire-flags sheen,

To and fro they were hurried about!

And to and fro, and in and out,

The wan stars danced between.

And the coming wind did roar more loud,

And the sails did sigh like sedge,

And the rain poured down from one black cloud;

The Moon was at its edge.

The thick black cloud was cleft, and still

The Moon was at its side:

Like waters shot from some high crag,

The lightning fell with never a jag,

A river steep and wide.

The loud wind never reached the ship,

Yet now the ship moved on!

Beneath the lightning and the Moon

The dead men gave a groan.

They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,

Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;

It had been strange, even in a dream,

To have seen those dead men rise.

The helmsman steered, the ship moved on;

Yet never a breeze up-blew;

The mariners all 'gan work the ropes,

Where they were wont to do;

They raised their limbs like lifeless tools—

We were a ghastly crew.

The body of my brother's son

Stood by me, knee to knee:

The body and I pulled at one rope,

But he said nought to me.

'I fear thee, ancient Mariner!'

Be calm, thou Wedding-Guest!

'Twas not those souls that fled in pain,

Which to their corses came again,

But a troop of spirits blest:

For when it dawned—they dropped their arms,

And clustered round the mast;

Sweet sounds rose slowly through their mouths,

And from their bodies passed.

Around, around, flew each sweet sound,

Then darted to the Sun;

Slowly the sounds came back again,

Now mixed, now one by one.

Sometimes a-dropping from the sky

I heard the sky-lark sing;

Sometimes all little birds that are,

How they seemed to fill the sea and air

With their sweet jargoning!

And now 'twas like all instruments,

Now like a lonely flute;

And now it is an angel's song,

That makes the heavens be mute.

It ceased; yet still the sails made on

A pleasant noise till noon,

A noise like of a hidden brook

In the leafy month of June,

That to the sleeping woods all night

Singeth a quiet tune.

Till noon we quietly sailed on,

Yet never a breeze did breathe:

Slowly and smoothly went the ship,

Moved onward from beneath.

Under the keel nine fathom deep,

From the land of mist and snow,

The spirit slid: and it was he

That made the ship to go.

The sails at noon left off their tune,

And the ship stood still also.

The Sun, right up above the mast,

Had fixed her to the ocean:

But in a minute she 'gan stir,

With a short uneasy motion—

Backwards and forwards half her length

With a short uneasy motion.

Then like a pawing horse let go,

She made a sudden bound:

It flung the blood into my head,

And I fell down in a swound.

How long in that same fit I lay,

I have not to declare;

But ere my living life returned,

I heard and in my soul discerned

Two voices in the air.

'Is it he?' quoth one, 'Is this the man?

By him who died on cross,

With his cruel bow he laid full low

The harmless Albatross.

The spirit who bideth by himself

In the land of mist and snow,

He loved the bird that loved the man

Who shot him with his bow.'

The other was a softer voice,

As soft as honey-dew:

Quoth he, 'The man hath penance done,

And penance more will do.'

**PART VI**

*First Voice*

'But tell me, tell me! speak again,

Thy soft response renewing—

What makes that ship drive on so fast?

What is the ocean doing?'

*Second Voice*

Still as a slave before his lord,

The ocean hath no blast;

His great bright eye most silently

Up to the Moon is cast—

If he may know which way to go;

For she guides him smooth or grim.

See, brother, see! how graciously

She looketh down on him.'

*First Voice*

'But why drives on that ship so fast,

Without or wave or wind?'

*Second Voice*

'The air is cut away before,

And closes from behind.

Fly, brother, fly! more high, more high!

Or we shall be belated:

For slow and slow that ship will go,

When the Mariner's trance is abated.'

I woke, and we were sailing on

As in a gentle weather:

'Twas night, calm night, the moon was high;

The dead men stood together.

All stood together on the deck,

For a charnel-dungeon fitter:

All fixed on me their stony eyes,

That in the Moon did glitter.

The pang, the curse, with which they died,

Had never passed away:

I could not draw my eyes from theirs,

Nor turn them up to pray.

And now this spell was snapt: once more

I viewed the ocean green,

And looked far forth, yet little saw

Of what had else been seen—

Like one, that on a lonesome road

Doth walk in fear and dread,

And having once turned round walks on,

And turns no more his head;

Because he knows, a frightful fiend

Doth close behind him tread.

But soon there breathed a wind on me,

Nor sound nor motion made:

Its path was not upon the sea,

In ripple or in shade.

It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek

Like a meadow-gale of spring—

It mingled strangely with my fears,

Yet it felt like a welcoming.

Swiftly, swiftly flew the ship,

Yet she sailed softly too:

Sweetly, sweetly blew the breeze—

On me alone it blew.

Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed

The light-house top I see?

Is this the hill? is this the kirk?

Is this mine own countree?

We drifted o'er the harbour-bar,

And I with sobs did pray—

O let me be awake, my God!

Or let me sleep alway.

The harbour-bay was clear as glass,

So smoothly it was strewn!

And on the bay the moonlight lay,

And the shadow of the Moon.

The rock shone bright, the kirk no less,

That stands above the rock:

The moonlight steeped in silentness

The steady weathercock.

And the bay was white with silent light,

Till rising from the same,

Full many shapes, that shadows were,

In crimson colours came.

A little distance from the prow

Those crimson shadows were:

I turned my eyes upon the deck—

Oh, Christ! what saw I there!

Each corse lay flat, lifeless and flat,

And, by the holy rood!

A man all light, a seraph-man,

On every corse there stood.

This seraph-band, each waved his hand:

It was a heavenly sight!

They stood as signals to the land,

Each one a lovely light;

This seraph-band, each waved his hand,

No voice did they impart—

No voice; but oh! the silence sank

Like music on my heart.

But soon I heard the dash of oars,

I heard the Pilot's cheer;

My head was turned perforce away

And I saw a boat appear.

The Pilot and the Pilot's boy,

I heard them coming fast:

Dear Lord in Heaven! it was a joy

The dead men could not blast.

I saw a third—I heard his voice:

It is the Hermit good!

He singeth loud his godly hymns

That he makes in the wood.

He'll shrieve my soul, he'll wash away

The Albatross's blood.

**PART VII**

This Hermit good lives in that wood

Which slopes down to the sea.

How loudly his sweet voice he rears!

He loves to talk with marineres

That come from a far countree.

He kneels at morn, and noon, and eve—

He hath a cushion plump:

It is the moss that wholly hides

The rotted old oak-stump.

The skiff-boat neared: I heard them talk,

'Why, this is strange, I trow!

Where are those lights so many and fair,

That signal made but now?'

'Strange, by my faith!' the Hermit said—

'And they answered not our cheer!

The planks looked warped! and see those sails,

How thin they are and sere!

I never saw aught like to them,

Unless perchance it were

Brown skeletons of leaves that lag

My forest-brook along;

When the ivy-tod is heavy with snow,

And the owlet whoops to the wolf below,

That eats the she-wolf's young.'

'Dear Lord! it hath a fiendish look—

(The Pilot made reply)

I am a-feared'—'Push on, push on!'

Said the Hermit cheerily.

The boat came closer to the ship,

But I nor spake nor stirred;

The boat came close beneath the ship,

And straight a sound was heard.

Under the water it rumbled on,

Still louder and more dread:

It reached the ship, it split the bay;

The ship went down like lead.

Stunned by that loud and dreadful sound,

Which sky and ocean smote,

Like one that hath been seven days drowned

My body lay afloat;

But swift as dreams, myself I found

Within the Pilot's boat.

Upon the whirl, where sank the ship,

The boat spun round and round;

And all was still, save that the hill

Was telling of the sound.

I moved my lips—the Pilot shrieked

And fell down in a fit;

The holy Hermit raised his eyes,

And prayed where he did sit.

I took the oars: the Pilot's boy,

Who now doth crazy go,

Laughed loud and long, and all the while

His eyes went to and fro.

'Ha! ha!' quoth he, 'full plain I see,

The Devil knows how to row.'

And now, all in my own countree,

I stood on the firm land!

The Hermit stepped forth from the boat,

And scarcely he could stand.

'O shrieve me, shrieve me, holy man!'

The Hermit crossed his brow.

'Say quick,' quoth he, 'I bid thee say—

What manner of man art thou?'

Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched

With a woful agony,

Which forced me to begin my tale;

And then it left me free.

Since then, at an uncertain hour,

That agony returns:

And till my ghastly tale is told,

This heart within me burns.

I pass, like night, from land to land;

I have strange power of speech;

That moment that his face I see,

I know the man that must hear me:

To him my tale I teach.

What loud uproar bursts from that door!

The wedding-guests are there:

But in the garden-bower the bride

And bride-maids singing are:

And hark the little vesper bell,

Which biddeth me to prayer!

O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been

Alone on a wide wide sea:

So lonely 'twas, that God himself

Scarce seemèd there to be.

O sweeter than the marriage-feast,

'Tis sweeter far to me,

To walk together to the kirk

With a goodly company!—

To walk together to the kirk,

And all together pray,

While each to his great Father bends,

Old men, and babes, and loving friends

And youths and maidens gay!

Farewell, farewell! but this I tell

To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!

He prayeth well, who loveth well

Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best

All things both great and small;

For the dear God who loveth us,

He made and loveth all.

The Mariner, whose eye is bright,

Whose beard with age is hoar,

Is gone: and now the Wedding-Guest

Turned from the bridegroom's door.

He went like one that hath been stunned,

And is of sense forlorn:

A sadder and a wiser man,

He rose the morrow morn.

POET[Samuel Taylor Coleridge](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/samuel-taylor-coleridge) 1772–1834

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Romantic](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=18)

SUBJECTS[Religion](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=67), [Crime & Punishment](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=63), [Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Social Commentaries](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=61), [Seas, Rivers, & Streams](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=26),[Horror](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=69), [Faith & Doubt](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=81), [Nature](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=42), [Christianity](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=86), [Weather](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=43), [Death](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=23), [Mythology & Folklore](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=96),[Animals](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=44), [God & the Divine](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=82)

POETIC TERMS[Imagery,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=42)[Allusion,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=39)[Rhymed Stanza](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)

Ozymandias

BY [PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/percy-bysshe-shelley)

I met a traveller from an antique land,

Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,

Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,

And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;

And on the pedestal, these words appear:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;

Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Source: *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose* (1977)

Also available as an audio poem.

POET[Percy Bysshe Shelley](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/percy-bysshe-shelley) 1792–1822

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Romantic](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=18)

SUBJECTS[Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Activities](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=79), [Travels & Journeys](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=14), [Time & Brevity](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=38)

POETIC TERMS[Sonnet](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=25)

The Raven

BY [EDGAR ALLAN POE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/edgar-allan-poe)

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,

Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—

    While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,

As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

“’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—

            Only this and nothing more.”

    Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;

And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.

    Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to borrow

    From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—

For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—

            Nameless *here* for evermore.

    And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain

Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;

    So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating

    “’Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door—

Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;—

            This it is and nothing more.”

    Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,

“Sir,” said I, “or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;

    But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,

    And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,

That I scarce was sure I heard you”—here I opened wide the door;—

            Darkness there and nothing more.

    Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,

Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;

    But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,

    And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, “Lenore?”

This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, “Lenore!”—

            Merely this and nothing more.

    Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,

Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.

    “Surely,” said I, “surely that is something at my window lattice;

      Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore—

Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore;—

            ’Tis the wind and nothing more!”

    Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,

In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore;

    Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;

    But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—

Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door—

            Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,

By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,

“Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,” I said, “art sure no craven,

Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly shore—

Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!”

            Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

    Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,

Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore;

    For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being

    Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—

Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,

            With such name as “Nevermore.”

    But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only

That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.

    Nothing farther then he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—

    Till I scarcely more than muttered “Other friends have flown before—

On the morrow *he* will leave me, as my Hopes have flown before.”

            Then the bird said “Nevermore.”

    Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,

“Doubtless,” said I, “what it utters is its only stock and store

    Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster

    Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—

Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore

            Of ‘Never—nevermore’.”

    But the Raven still beguiling all my fancy into smiling,

Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and bust and door;

    Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking

    Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—

What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore

            Meant in croaking “Nevermore.”

    This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing

To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom’s core;

    This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining

    On the cushion’s velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o’er,

But whose velvet-violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o’er,

            *She* shall press, ah, nevermore!

    Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer

Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.

    “Wretch,” I cried, “thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee

    Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore;

Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!”

            Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

    “Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—

Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,

    Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—

    On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—

Is there—*is* there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!”

            Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

    “Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!

By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—

    Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,

    It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—

Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.”

            Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

    “Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked, upstarting—

“Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!

    Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!

    Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!

Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”

            Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

    And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting

On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;

    And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,

    And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;

And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor

            Shall be lifted—nevermore!

POET[Edgar Allan Poe](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/edgar-allan-poe) 1809–1849

POET’S REGION[U.S., Mid-Atlantic](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=20)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Victorian](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=19)

SUBJECTS[Ghosts & the Supernatural](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=65), [Sorrow & Grieving](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=101), [Disappointment & Failure](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=75), [Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Horror](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=69),[Mythology & Folklore](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=96)

HOLIDAYS[Halloween](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#holiday=25)

POETIC TERMS[Rhymed Stanza](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)

Annabel Lee

BY [EDGAR ALLAN POE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/edgar-allan-poe)

It was many and many a year ago,

   In a kingdom by the sea,

That a maiden there lived whom you may know

   By the name of Annabel Lee;

And this maiden she lived with no other thought

   Than to love and be loved by me.

*I* was a child and *she* was a child,

   In this kingdom by the sea,

But we loved with a love that was more than love—

   I and my Annabel Lee—

With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven

   Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,

   In this kingdom by the sea,

A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling

   My beautiful Annabel Lee;

So that her highborn kinsmen came

   And bore her away from me,

To shut her up in a sepulchre

   In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,

   Went envying her and me—

Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,

   In this kingdom by the sea)

That the wind came out of the cloud by night,

   Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love

   Of those who were older than we—

   Of many far wiser than we—

And neither the angels in Heaven above

   Nor the demons down under the sea

Can ever dissever my soul from the soul

   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams

   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes

   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side

   Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,

   In her sepulchre there by the sea—

   In her tomb by the sounding sea.

POET[Edgar Allan Poe](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/edgar-allan-poe) 1809–1849

POET’S REGION[U.S., Mid-Atlantic](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=20)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Victorian](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=19)

SUBJECTS[Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Love](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=7), [Seas, Rivers, & Streams](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=26), [Horror](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=69), [Nature](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=42), [Relationships](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=77), [Death](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=23), [Mythology & Folklore](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=96), [Romantic Love](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=110), [Classic Love](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=111), [Infatuation & Crushes](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=113), [Heartache & Loss](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=118)

POETIC TERMS[Ballad](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=19)

Song of Myself (1892 version)

BY [WALT WHITMAN](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/walt-whitman)

**1**

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,

I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air,

Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,

I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,

Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,

Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,

I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,

Nature without check with original energy.

**2**

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,

I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,

The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,

It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,

I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,

I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,

Echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,

My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,

The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color’d sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,

The sound of the belch’d words of my voice loos’d to the eddies of the wind,

A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,

The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,

The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides,

The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.

Have you reckon’d a thousand acres much? have you reckon’d the earth much?

Have you practis’d so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

Fire and Ice

BY [ROBERT FROST](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-frost)

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I’ve tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate

To say that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.

POET[Robert Frost](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-frost) 1874–1963

POET’S REGION[U.S., New England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=23)

SUBJECTS[Religion](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=67), [Nature](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=42), [Arts & Sciences](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=88), [Humor & Satire](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=48), [Philosophy](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=89), [Sciences](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=90)

POETIC TERMS[Epigram](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=32)

Mending Wall

BY [ROBERT FROST](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-frost)

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,

And spills the upper boulders in the sun;

And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

The work of hunters is another thing:

I have come after them and made repair

Where they have left not one stone on a stone,

But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,

To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,

No one has seen them made or heard them made,

But at spring mending-time we find them there.

I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;

And on a day we meet to walk the line

And set the wall between us once again.

We keep the wall between us as we go.

To each the boulders that have fallen to each.

And some are loaves and some so nearly balls

We have to use a spell to make them balance:

"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"

We wear our fingers rough with handling them.

Oh, just another kind of out-door game,

One on a side. It comes to little more:

There where it is we do not need the wall:

He is all pine and I am apple orchard.

My apple trees will never get across

And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder

If I could put a notion in his head:

*"Why* do they make good neighbours? Isn't it

Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know

What I was walling in or walling out,

And to whom I was like to give offence.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,

But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather

He said it for himself. I see him there

Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top

In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,

Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

He will not go behind his father's saying,

And he likes having thought of it so well

He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."

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POET[Robert Frost](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-frost) 1874–1963

POET’S REGION[U.S., New England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=23)

SUBJECTS[Friends & Enemies](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=11), [Landscapes & Pastorals](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=80), [Nature](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=42), [Relationships](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=77)

POETIC TERMS[Blank Verse](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=31)

The Road Not Taken

BY [ROBERT FROST](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-frost)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

POET[Robert Frost](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-frost) 1874–1963

POET’S REGION[U.S., New England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=23)

SUBJECTS[Time & Brevity](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=38), [Nature](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=42), [Landscapes & Pastorals](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=80), [Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [Midlife](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=74), [Fall](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=37)

OCCASIONS[Graduation](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#occasion=3)

POETIC TERMS[Rhymed Stanza](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=45)

Robert Frost

1874–1963



Robert Frost holds a unique and almost isolated position in American letters. “Though his career fully spans the modern period and though it is impossible to speak of him as anything other than a modern poet,” writes James M. Cox, “it is difficult to place him in the main tradition of modern poetry.” In a sense, Frost stands at the crossroads of 19th-century American poetry and modernism, for in his verse may be found the culmination of many 19th-century tendencies and traditions as well as parallels to the works of his 20th-century contemporaries. Taking his symbols from the public domain, Frost developed, as many critics note, an original, modern idiom and a sense of directness and economy that reflect the imagism of [Ezra Pound](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=80585) and [Amy Lowell](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=80647). On the other hand, as Leonard Unger and William Van O’Connor point out in *Poems for Study,* “Frost’s poetry, unlike that of such contemporaries as Eliot, Stevens, and the later Yeats, shows no marked departure from the poetic practices of the nineteenth century.” Although he avoids traditional verse forms and only uses rhyme erratically, Frost is not an innovator and his technique is never experimental.

Frost’s theory of poetic composition ties him to both centuries. Like the 19th-century Romantics, he maintained that a poem is “never a put-up job.... It begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a loneliness. It is never a thought to begin with. It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness.” Yet, “working out his own version of the ‘impersonal’ view of art,” as Hyatt H. Waggoner observed, Frost also upheld [T. S. Eliot](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=81338)‘s idea that the man who suffers and the artist who creates are totally separate. In a 1932 letter to Sydney Cox, Frost explained his conception of poetry: “The objective idea is all I ever cared about. Most of my ideas occur in verse.... To be too subjective with what an artist has managed to make objective is to come on him presumptuously and render ungraceful what he in pain of his life had faith he had made graceful.”

To accomplish such objectivity and grace, Frost took up 19th-century tools and made them new. Lawrance Thompson has explained that, according to Frost, “the self-imposed restrictions of meter in form and of coherence in content” work to a poet’s advantage; they liberate him from the experimentalist’s burden—the perpetual search for new forms and alternative structures. Thus Frost, as he himself put it in *“The Constant Symbol,”* wrote his verse regular; he never completely abandoned conventional metrical forms for free verse, as so many of his contemporaries were doing. At the same time, his adherence to meter, line length, and rhyme scheme was not an arbitrary choice. He maintained that “the freshness of a poem belongs absolutely to its not having been thought out and then set to verse as the verse in turn might be set to music.” He believed, rather, that the poem’s particular mood dictated or determined the poet’s “first commitment to metre and length of line.”

Critics frequently point out that Frost complicated his problem and enriched his style by setting traditional meters against the natural rhythms of speech. Drawing his language primarily from the vernacular, he avoided artificial poetic diction by employing the accent of a soft-spoken New Englander. In *The Function of Criticism,*[Yvor Winters](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=81799" \t "_blank) faulted Frost for his “endeavor to make his style approximate as closely as possible the style of conversation.” But what Frost achieved in his poetry was much more complex than a mere imitation of the New England farmer idiom. He wanted to restore to literature the “sentence sounds that underlie the words,” the “vocal gesture” that enhances meaning. That is, he felt the poet’s ear must be sensitive to the voice in order to capture with the written word the significance of sound in the spoken word. “[The Death of the Hired Man](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=173525),” for instance, consists almost entirely of dialogue between Mary and Warren, her farmer-husband, but critics have observed that in this poem Frost takes the prosaic patterns of their speech and makes them lyrical. To Ezra Pound “The Death of the Hired Man” represented Frost at his best—when he “dared to write ... in the natural speech of New England; in natural spoken speech, which is very different from the ‘natural’ speech of the newspapers, and of many professors.”

Frost’s use of New England dialect is only one aspect of his often discussed regionalism. Within New England, his particular focus was on New Hampshire, which he called “one of the two best states in the Union,” the other being Vermont. In an essay entitled “Robert Frost and New England: A Revaluation,” W. G. O’Donnell noted how from the start, in *A Boy’s Will,* “Frost had already decided to give his writing a local habitation and a New England name, to root his art in the soil that he had worked with his own hands.” Reviewing *North of Boston* in the *New Republic,* Amy Lowell wrote, “Not only is his work New England in subject, it is so in technique.... Mr. Frost has reproduced both people and scenery with a vividness which is extraordinary.” Many other critics have lauded Frost’s ability to realistically evoke the New England landscape; they point out that one can visualize an orchard in “After Apple-Picking” or imagine spring in a farmyard in “Two Tramps in Mud Time.” In this “ability to portray the local truth in nature,” O’Donnell claims, Frost has no peer. The same ability prompted Pound to declare, “I know more of farm life than I did before I had read his poems. That means I know more of ‘Life.’”

Frost’s regionalism, critics remark, is in his realism, not in politics; he creates no picture of regional unity or sense of community. In *The Continuity of American Poetry,* Roy Harvey Pearce describes Frost’s protagonists as individuals who are constantly forced to confront their individualism as such and to reject the modern world in order to retain their identity. Frost’s use of nature is not only similar but closely tied to this regionalism. He stays as clear of religion and mysticism as he does of politics. What he finds in nature is sensuous pleasure; he is also sensitive to the earth’s fertility and to man’s relationship to the soil. To critic M. L. Rosenthal, Frost’s pastoral quality, his “lyrical and realistic repossession of the rural and ‘natural,’” is the staple of his reputation.

Yet, just as Frost is aware of the distances between one man and another, so he is also always aware of the distinction, the ultimate separateness, of nature and man. Marion Montgomery has explained, “His attitude toward nature is one of armed and amicable truce and mutual respect interspersed with crossings of the boundaries” between individual man and natural forces. Below the surface of Frost’s poems are dreadful implications, what Rosenthal calls his “shocked sense of the helpless cruelty of things.” This natural cruelty is at work in “Design” and in “Once by the Pacific.” The ominous tone of these two poems prompted Rosenthal’s further comment: “At his most powerful Frost is as staggered by ‘the horror’ as Eliot and approaches the hysterical edge of sensibility in a comparable way.... His is still the modern mind in search of its own meaning.”

The austere and tragic view of life that emerges in so many of Frost’s poems is modulated by his metaphysical use of detail. As Frost portrays him, man might be alone in an ultimately indifferent universe, but he may nevertheless look to the natural world for metaphors of his own condition. Thus, in his search for meaning in the modern world, Frost focuses on those moments when the seen and the unseen, the tangible and the spiritual intersect. John T. Napier calls this Frost’s ability “to find the ordinary a matrix for the extraordinary.” In this respect, he is often compared with[Emily Dickinson](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=1775) and [Ralph Waldo Emerson](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=81524), in whose poetry, too, a simple fact, object, person, or event will be transfigured and take on greater mystery or significance. The poem “[Birches”](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=173524) is an example: it contains the image of slender trees bent to the ground temporarily by a boy’s swinging on them or permanently by an ice-storm. But as the poem unfolds, it becomes clear that the speaker is concerned not only with child’s play and natural phenomena, but also with the point at which physical and spiritual reality merge.

Such symbolic import of mundane facts informs many of Frost’s poems, and in “Education by Poetry” he explained: “Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, ‘grace’ metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have. Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another.... Unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere.”

Frost’s own poetical education began in San Francisco where he was born in 1874, but he found his place of safety in New England when his family moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1884 following his father’s death. The move was actually a return, for Frost’s ancestors were originally New Englanders. The region must have been particularly conducive to the writing of poetry because within the next five years Frost had made up his mind to be a poet. In fact, he graduated from Lawrence High School, in 1892, as class poet (he also shared the honor of co-valedictorian with his wife-to-be Elinor White); and two years later, the *New York Independent* accepted his poem entitled “My Butterfly,” launching his status as a professional poet with a check for $15.00.

To celebrate his first publication, Frost had a book of six poems privately printed; two copies of *Twilight* were made—one for himself and one for his fiancee. Over the next eight years, however, he succeeded in having only thirteen more poems published. During this time, Frost sporadically attended Dartmouth and Harvard and earned a living teaching school and, later, working a farm in Derry, New Hampshire. But in 1912, discouraged by American magazines’ constant rejection of his work, he took his family to England, where he could “write and be poor without further scandal in the family.” In England, Frost found the professional esteem denied him in his native country. Continuing to write about New England, he had two books published, *A Boy’s Will* and *North of Boston,* which established his reputation so that his return to the United States in 1915 was as a celebrated literary figure. Holt put out an American edition of *North of Boston,* and periodicals that had once scorned his work now sought it.

Since 1915 Frost’s position in American letters has been firmly rooted; in the years before his death he came to be considered the unofficial poet laureate of the United States. On his seventy-fifth birthday, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution in his honor which said, “His poems have helped to guide American thought and humor and wisdom, setting forth to our minds a reliable representation of ourselves and of all men.” In 1955, the State of Vermont named a mountain after him in Ripton, the town of his legal residence; and at the presidential inauguration of John F. Kennedy in 1961, Frost was given the unprecedented honor of being asked to read a poem. Frost wrote a poem called “Dedication” for the occasion, but could not read it given the day’s harsh sunlight. He instead recited “The Gift Outright,” which Kennedy had originally asked him to read, with a revised, more forward-looking, last line.

Though Frost allied himself with no literary school or movement, the imagists helped at the start to promote his American reputation. *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*published his work before others began to clamor for it. It also published a review by Ezra Pound of the British edition of *A Boy’s Will,* which Pound said “has the tang of the New Hampshire woods, and it has just this utter sincerity. It is not post-Miltonic or post-Swinburnian or post Kiplonian. This man has the good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing, the thing as he sees it.” Amy Lowell reviewed *North of Boston* in the *New Republic,* and she, too, sang Frost’s praises: “He writes in classic metres in a way to set the teeth of all the poets of the older schools on edge; and he writes in classic metres, and uses inversions and cliches whenever he pleases, those devices so abhorred by the newest generation. He goes his own way, regardless of anyone else’s rules, and the result is a book of unusual power and sincerity.” In these first two volumes, Frost introduced not only his affection for New England themes and his unique blend of traditional meters and colloquialism, but also his use of dramatic monologues and dialogues. “[Mending Wall](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=173530),” the leading poem in *North of Boston,*describes the friendly argument between the speaker and his neighbor as they walk along their common wall replacing fallen stones; their differing attitudes toward “boundaries” offer symbolic significance typical of the poems in these early collections.

*Mountain Interval* marked Frost’s turn to another kind of poem, a brief meditation sparked by an object, person or event. Like the monologues and dialogues, these short pieces have a dramatic quality. “Birches,” discussed above, is an example, as is “[The Road Not Taken](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=173536),” in which a fork in a woodland path transcends the specific. The distinction of this volume, the *Boston Transcript* said, “is that Mr. Frost takes the lyricism of *A Boy’s Will* and plays a deeper music and gives a more intricate variety of experience.”

Several new qualities emerged in Frost’s work with the appearance of *New Hampshire,* particularly a new self-consciousness and willingness to speak of himself and his art. The volume, for which Frost won his first Pulitzer Prize, “pretends to be nothing but a long poem with notes and grace notes,” as [Louis Untermeyer](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=81044) described it. The title poem, approximately fourteen pages long, is a “rambling tribute” to Frost’s favorite state and “is starred and dotted with scientific numerals in the manner of the most profound treatise.” Thus, a footnote at the end of a line of poetry will refer the reader to another poem seemingly inserted to merely reinforce the text of “New Hampshire.” Some of these poems are in the form of epigrams, which appear for the first time in Frost’s work. “[Fire and Ice](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=173527),” for example, one of the better known epigrams, speculates on the means by which the world will end. Frost’s most famous and, according to J. McBride Dabbs, most perfect lyric, “[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=171621),” is also included in this collection; conveying “the insistent whisper of death at the heart of life,” the poem portrays a speaker who stops his sleigh in the midst of a snowy woods only to be called from the inviting gloom by the recollection of practical duties. Frost himself said of this poem that it is the kind he’d like to print on one page followed with “forty pages of footnotes.”

*West-Running Brook,* Frost’s fifth book of poems, is divided into six sections, one of which is taken up entirely by the title poem. This poem refers to a brook which perversely flows west instead of east to the Atlantic like all other brooks. A comparison is set up between the brook and the poem’s speaker who trusts himself to go by “contraries”; further rebellious elements exemplified by the brook give expression to an eccentric individualism, Frost’s stoic theme of resistance and self-realization. Reviewing the collection in the *New York Herald Tribune,* [Babette Deutsch](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=1754) wrote: “The courage that is bred by a dark sense of Fate, the tenderness that broods over mankind in all its blindness and absurdity, the vision that comes to rest as fully on kitchen smoke and lapsing snow as on mountains and stars—these are his, and in his seemingly casual poetry, he quietly makes them ours.”

*A Further Range,* which earned Frost another Pulitzer Prize and was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, contains two groups of poems subtitled “Taken Doubly” and “Taken Singly.” In the first, and more interesting, of these groups, the poems are somewhat didactic, though there are humorous and satiric pieces as well. Included here is “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” which opens with the story of two itinerant lumbermen who offer to cut the speaker’s wood for pay; the poem then develops into a sermon on the relationship between work and play, vocation and avocation, preaching the necessity to unite them. Of the entire volume, William Rose Benet wrote, “It is better worth reading than nine-tenths of the books that will come your way this year. In a time when all kinds of insanity are assailing the nations it is good to listen to this quiet humor, even about a hen, a hornet, or Square Matthew.... And if anybody should ask me why I still believe in my land, I have only to put this book in his hand and answer, ‘Well-here is a man of my country.’”   Most critics acknowledge that Frost’s poetry in the forties and fifties grew more and more abstract, cryptic, and even sententious, so it is generally on the basis of his earlier work that he is judged. His politics and religious faith, hitherto informed by skepticism and local color, became more and more the guiding principles of his work. He had been, as [Randall Jarrell](http://preview.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=3463)points out, “a very odd and very radical radical when young” yet became “sometimes callously and unimaginatively conservative” in his old age. He had become a public figure, and in the years before his death, much of his poetry was written from this stance.

Reviewing *A Witness Tree* in *Books,* Wilbert Snow noted a few poems “which have a right to stand with the best things he has written”: “Come In,” “The Silken Tent,” and “Carpe Diem” especially. Yet Snow went on: “Some of the poems here are little more than rhymed fancies; others lack the bullet-like unity of structure to be found in *North of Boston.*” On the other hand, Stephen Vincent Benet felt that Frost had “never written any better poems than some of those in this book.” Similarly, critics were let down by *In the Clearing.* One wrote, “Although this reviewer considers Robert Frost to be the foremost contemporary U.S. poet, he regretfully must state that most of the poems in this new volume are disappointing.... [They] often are closer to jingles than to the memorable poetry we associate with his name.” Another maintained that “the bulk of the book consists of poems of ‘philosophic talk.’ Whether you like them or not depends mostly on whether you share the ‘philosophy.’”

Indeed, many readers do share Frost’s philosophy, and still others who do not nevertheless continue to find delight and significance in his large body of poetry. In October, 1963, President John F. Kennedy delivered a speech at the dedication of the Robert Frost Library in Amherst, Massachusetts. “In honoring Robert Frost,” the President said, “we therefore can pay honor to the deepest source of our national strength. That strength takes many forms and the most obvious forms are not always the most significant.... Our national strength matters; but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much. This was the special significance of Robert Frost.” The poet would probably have been pleased by such recognition, for he had said once, in an interview with Harvey Breit: “One thing I care about, and wish young people could care about, is taking poetry as the first form of understanding. If poetry isn’t understanding all, the whole world, then it isn’t worth anything.”

Frost’s poetry is revered to this day. When a previously unknown poem by Frost titled “War Thoughts at Home,” was discovered and dated to 1918, it was subsequently published in the fall, 2006, edition of the *Virginia Quarterly Review.*Frost’s*Complete Works* are currently being published by Harvard University Press.

“Faith” is fine invention (202)

BY [EMILY DICKINSON](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/emily-dickinson)

“Faith” is a fine invention

For Gentlemen who *see!*

But Microscopes are prudent

In an Emergency!

Source: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson Edited by R. W. Franklin* (Harvard University Press, 1999)

POET[Emily Dickinson](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/emily-dickinson) 1830–1886

POET’S REGION[U.S., New England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=23)

SUBJECTS[Arts & Sciences](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=88), [Religion](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=67), [Faith & Doubt](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=81), [Sciences](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=90)

POETIC TERMS[Epigram,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=32)[Common Measure](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=46)

“Hope” is the thing with feathers - (314)

BY [EMILY DICKINSON](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/emily-dickinson)

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -

And sore must be the storm -

That could abash the little Bird

That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chillest land -

And on the strangest Sea -

Yet - never - in Extremity,

It asked a crumb - of me.

Source: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson Edited by R. W. Franklin* (Harvard University Press, 1999)

POET[Emily Dickinson](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/emily-dickinson) 1830–1886

POET’S REGION[U.S., New England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=23)

SUBJECTS[Faith & Doubt](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=81), [Religion](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=67)

OCCASIONS[Funerals](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#occasion=6)

POETIC TERMS[Metaphor,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=41)[Common Measure](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=46)

Jabberwocky

BY [LEWIS CARROLL](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/lewis-carroll)

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

      Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,

      And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

      The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

      The frumious Bandersnatch!”

He took his vorpal sword in hand;

      Long time the manxome foe he sought—

So rested he by the Tumtum tree

      And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,

      The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,

Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,

      And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through

      The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!

He left it dead, and with its head

      He went galumphing back.

“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?

      Come to my arms, my beamish boy!

O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”

      He chortled in his joy.

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

      Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,

      And the mome raths outgrabe.

Source: *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children* (1983)

POET[Lewis Carroll](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/lewis-carroll) 1832–1898

POET’S REGION[England](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=11)

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Victorian](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=19)

SUBJECTS[Arts & Sciences](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=88), [Mythology & Folklore](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=96), [Humor & Satire](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=48)

POETIC TERMS[Ballad](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=19)

Theme for English B

BY [LANGSTON HUGHES](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/langston-hughes)

The instructor said,

*Go home and write*

*a page tonight.*

*And let that page come out of you—*

*Then, it will be true.*

I wonder if it’s that simple?

I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.

I went to school there, then Durham, then here

to this college on the hill above Harlem.

I am the only colored student in my class.

The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,

through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,

Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,

the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator

up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It’s not easy to know what is true for you or me

at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I’m what

I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you.

hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page.

(I hear New York, too.) Me—who?

Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.

I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.

I like a pipe for a Christmas present,

or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach.

I guess being colored doesn’t make me *not* like

the same things other folks like who are other races.

So will my page be colored that I write?

Being me, it will not be white.

But it will be

a part of you, instructor.

You are white—

yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.

That’s American.

Sometimes perhaps you don’t want to be a part of me.

Nor do I often want to be a part of you.

But we are, that’s true!

As I learn from you,

I guess you learn from me—

although you’re older—and white—

and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

Langston Hughes, “Theme for English B” from *Collected Poems.* Copyright © 1994 by The Estate of Langston Hughes. Reprinted with the permission of Harold Ober Associates Incorporated.

Source: *Selected Poems* (Vintage Books, 1959)

POET[Langston Hughes](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/langston-hughes) 1902–1967

SCHOOL / PERIOD[Harlem Renaissance](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#school-period=9)

SUBJECTS[Living](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=71), [School & Learning](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=3), [Cities & Urban Life](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=95), [Social Commentaries](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=61), [Race & Ethnicity](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=91),[Youth](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=2), [Activities](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=79), [Coming of Age](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=73)

POETIC TERMS[Free Verse,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=21)[Couplet,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=20)[Mixed,](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=47)[Persona](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=60)

Caged Bird

BY [MAYA ANGELOU](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/maya-angelou)

A free bird leaps

on the back of the wind

and floats downstream

till the current ends

and dips his wing

in the orange sun rays

and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks

down his narrow cage

can seldom see through

his bars of rage

his wings are clipped and

his feet are tied

so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings

with a fearful trill

of things unknown

but longed for still

and his tune is heard

on the distant hill

for the caged bird

sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze

and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees

and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn

and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams

his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream

his wings are clipped and his feet are tied

so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings

with a fearful trill

of things unknown

but longed for still

and his tune is heard

on the distant hill

for the caged bird

sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou, “Caged Bird” from *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* Copyright © 1983 by Maya Angelou. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Source: *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (Random House Inc., 1994)

POET[Maya Angelou](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/maya-angelou) 1928–2014

POET’S REGION[U.S., Southern](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/poets#poet-region=31)

SUBJECTS[Social Commentaries](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=61), [Pets](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=28), [Relationships](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=77), [Nature](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=42), [Animals](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=44)

POETIC TERMS[Metaphor](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#poetic-terms=41)