Chapter 11

Meeting Poetry: An Overview

Our words **poem** and **poetry** are derived from the Greek word *poiein*, "to create or make," the idea being that poetry is a created artifact, a structure that develops from the human imagination and that is expressed rhythmically in words. Although the word *poet* originally meant the writer of any kind of literature, we now use the word exclusively to mean a person who writes poems. *Poetry* and *poem* describe a wide variety of spoken and written forms, styles, and patterns, and also a wide variety of subjects. In light of this variety, we believe that the best way to understand poetry is to experience it—read it, study it, savor it, think about it, dream about it, learn it, memorize it, mull it over, talk about it with others, ask questions about it, enjoy it, love it. The more experience with poetry you have, the more you will develop your own ideas and definitions of just what poetry is, and the deeper will be your comprehension and the greater your appreciation.

The Nature of Poetry

We begin with a favorite poem based in the lives of students and teachers alike. It was written by Billy Collins, who was our American Poet Laureate from 2001 to 2003:

BILLY COLLINS (b. 1941)

Schoolsville (1985)

Glancing over my shoulder at the past,
I realize the number of students I have taught
is enough to populate a small town.

I can see it nestled in a paper landscape,
chalk dust flurrying down in winter, 5
nights dark as a blackboard.

The population ages but never graduates.
On hot afternoons they sweat the final in the park
and when it's cold they shiver around stoves
reading disorganized essays out loud. 10
A bell rings on the hour and everybody zigzags
in the streets with their books.

I forgot all their last names first and their
first names last in alphabetical order.
But the boy who always had his hand up 15
is an alderman and owns the haberdashery.
The girl who signed her papers in lipstick
leans against the drugstore, smoking,
brushing her hair like a machine.

Their grades are sewn into their clothes 20
like references to Hawthorne.° *i.e., The Scarlet Letter*
The A's stroll along with other A's.
The D's honk whenever they pass another D.

All the creative writing students recline
on the courthouse lawn and play the lute. 25
Wherever they go, they form a big circle.

Needless to say, I am the mayor.
I live in the white colonial at Maple and Main.
I rarely leave the house. The car deflates
in the driveway. Vines twirl around the porchswing. 30

Once in a while a student knocks on the door
with a term paper fifteen years late
or a question about Yeats or double-spacing.
And sometimes one will appear in a window pane
to watch me lecturing the wall paper, 35
quizzing the chandelier, reprimanding the air.

QUESTIONS

1. What recognizable school experiences does the poem mention? Why is "Schoolsville" the title?
2. Describe the speaker. How does he indicate affection for students?
3. What details indicate that the poem is fantasy and not reality? To what degree is the poem humorous?
4. Compare the details of this poem with those in Roethke's "Dolor" (Chapter 12). What similarities do you find in the choice and appropriateness of detail? What differences?
5. Each poem you read may help you understand, and therefore define, poetry. How might this poem help you begin making a definition?

"Schoolsville" reveals the variety and freedom of poetry. Unlike poems that are set out in strict line lengths, rhythms, and rhymes, "Schoolsville," though arranged in lines, does not follow measured rhythmical or rhyming patterns. The language is not difficult, the descriptions are straightforward, and the scenes seem both real and amusing. Many details—such as the "chalk dust flurrying down" like snow, "the girl who signed her papers in lipstick," and the students forming a circle when they meet—are genuinely funny. But the poem moves from apparent reality to something beyond reality. Unifying the poem is

the fanciful idea that school life is, like life generally, at once comical, serious, memorable, and poignant.

We may contrast "Schoolsville" with the following poem, "Hope," by Lisel Mueller, which deals with a topic—hope—that is common to us all, a topic that governs both our present and future behavior. What is unique, however, is that the poet provides us with thoughts about the nature of hope that might never have occurred to us. In this sense the poem fulfills the creative goal of poetry to lead us and guide us.

LISEL MUELLER (b. 1924)

Hope (1976)

It hovers in dark corners
before the lights are turned on,
  it shakes sleep from its eyes
  and drops from mushroom gills,
    it explodes in the starry heads (5)
    of dandelions turned sages,
      it sticks to the wings of green angels
      that sail from the tops of maples.

It sprouts in each occluded° eye
of the many-eyed potato, (10)
  it lives in each earthworm segment
  surviving cruelty,
    it is the motion that runs
    from the eyes to the tail of a dog,
      it is the mouth that inflates the lungs (15)
      of the child that has just been born.

°occluded: closed, blind

It is the singular gift
we cannot destroy in ourselves,
the argument that refutes death,
the genius that invents the future, (20)
all we know of God.

It is the serum which makes us swear
not to betray one another;
it is in this poem, trying to speak.

QUESTIONS

1. How does the poem illustrate the meaning of hope? How true or adequate are the specific locations where hope may be found? How do these locations provide the grounds for a broadened understanding of hope?
2. What does the poet mean by saying that hope is a "singular gift / we cannot destroy in ourselves" and that hope is a "serum" that prevents people from betraying each other?

3. According to the illustrations in the poem, how strong is the connection between hope and life? Can anything or anyone be without hope?
4. Why does the poet write "trying to speak" rather than "speaking" in the final line?

"Hope" demonstrates that poetry is inseparable from life and living. We regularly hope for fine weather, good luck, happier times, love, successful academic and athletic performance, more money, more and better friendships, successful and rewarding careers, and so on. But Mueller takes us on a new and unexpected trip. Her speaker reminds us that hope exists in common things around us where we have never even imagined it might be, such as the fluttering seeds ("angels") of maple trees, the expanding lungs of a newborn baby, and "the genius that invents the future." Hope may even be found in the blind eyes of a potato which, when planted in lowly garden dirt, possess an indomitable wish for growth. The poem makes these ordinary things extraordinary. Mueller even leaves us with a speculative and unusual conclusion, giving life to hope by stating that hope speaks simultaneously with poetry itself. All these connections, which Mueller naturally and easily creates for us, cause us to say yes, to agree that hope exists in every obscure and out-of-the-way part of existence. Like all good poetry, "Hope" leads us into thoughts that we have not only not considered, but that we have never even dreamed about.

We should always recognize that good poems, regardless of their topics, have similar power. To see this, let us look at another poem, by the seventeenth-century English poet Robert Herrick.

ROBERT HERRICK (1591–1664)

Here a Pretty Baby Lies (1648)

Here a pretty baby lies
Sung asleep with lullabies:
Pray be silent, and not stir
Th'easy earth that covers her.

QUESTIONS

1. What situation is described in this poem? To what degree is this situation either ordinary or unusual?
2. How does the final line change your perception of the first three lines? How does it change your response to the poem?
3. Consider the double meanings of the following words and phrases: "Here . . . lies"; "Sung asleep"; "lullabies"; "stir."
4. Compare this poem with Jonson's "On My First Daughter" (this chapter).

Nothing in the first three lines of this short poem seems anything other than ordinary. A scene is described that takes place over and over again everywhere in the world. A baby is sleeping quietly, and we are told to make no sounds that would awaken her. But the last line hits us with a hammer, making us realize that nothing in the poem is what we understood at first. We immediately change our

initial impressions and realize that the baby is not just sleeping but dead, lying not in a cradle but in a coffin; that the lullabies are not the lullabies sung by a loving mother but the religious songs sung at a funeral ceremony; and that the stirring is not just making noise but disturbing the still-loose earth that has just been shoveled onto the baby's grave. The effect of this very simple poem has been called overwhelming; it was overwhelming when it was first written in the seventeenth century, and it is still overwhelming.

The three poems we have just seen have much in common; they are serious, engaging, original, and powerful. The first, however, is amusing and slightly perplexing; the second is serious and thought-provoking; the third is sad and deeply moving. There are no other poems like them. Once we have read them, we will never forget them. Even if we never read them again (but we should), they will echo in our minds as time passes, sometimes with great power and impact, sometimes with less. In reading them again we may rediscover our original responses, and often we may have entirely new responses to them. In short, these poems live, and as long as we too live, they will be a permanent part of our minds.

Preliminary Ideas About Poetry

As "Schoolsville," "Hope," and "Here a Pretty Baby Lies" demonstrate, all good poems are unique, and all good poems broaden our comprehension and add layers to our understandings. Like living itself, the experience of poetry is a developing process, but nevertheless, it is possible to offer a number of preliminary statements as a guide to understanding. To begin with, poems are imaginative works expressed in words that are used with the utmost compression, force, and economy. Unlike prose, which is expansive if not exhaustive, many poems are brief. But poetry is also comprehensive, offering us high points of thought, feeling, reflection, and resolution. Poems may be formed in just about any coherent and developed shape, from a line of a single word to lines of twenty, thirty, or more words; and these lines may be organized into any number of repeating or nonrepeating patterns. Some poems make us think, give us new and unexpected insights, and generally instruct us. Other poems arouse our emotions, surprise us, amuse us, and inspire us. Ideally, reading and understanding poetry should prompt us to reexamine, reinforce, and reshape our ideas, our attitudes, our feelings, and our lives. Let us hear what Robert Frost concluded about poetry: "Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a metal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went."[1] Always be prepared for the surprise, and be delighted when it appears.

Poetry of the English Language

Today, most nations of the world have their own literatures, including poetry, with their own unique histories and characteristics. Name a nation, and you may be assured that it will have its own linguistic history, and its own history of literature. Let us try France, which has a history of literature and poetry that is many

[1] "The Figure a Poem Makes," in *Complete Poems of Robert Frost 1949* (New York: Holt, 1949) viii.

centuries old. Many Americans know "La Marseillaise," the French national anthem by Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle (1760–1836), and some may even be able to sing at least some of the lyrics. Name the Philippine Islands, the island nation on the other side of the world. The language of the Philippines is *Tagalog*, and there is a body of literature in that language. So also is it with Germany, Russia, Sweden, China, Japan, and as many nations as we might possibly name. In this anthology, however, we will be concentrating primarily on poetry in our own language by American, British, and Canadian poets. When we introduce poems from other languages, we will be relying on translations from these languages into English.

The earliest poems in English date back to the period of **Old English** (450–1100). Many of these early English poems reflect the influence of Christianity. Indeed, the most famous poem, the anonymous epic *Beowulf*, was probably interpreted as a Christian allegory even though it concerns the secular themes of adventure, courage, and war. Ever since the *Middle English* period (1100–1500), poets have written about many other subjects, although religious themes have remained important. Today, we find poetry on virtually all topics, including worship, music, love, society, sports, individuality, strong drink, sexuality, warfare, government, and politics; some poems treat special and unusual topics such as fishing, machines, buildings, computers, exotic birds, and car crashes.

In short, poetry is in a flourishing condition in all its many forms. Commonly held moral principles are instilled by the use of well-known brief poems, epigrams, rhymes, and jingles, such as "Work. / Don't shirk," "A good beginning / Is half the winning," and "A stitch in time / Saves nine." Many people, such as poets themselves and teachers, read poetry or parts of poems aloud in front of audiences of students, friends, families, and general audiences. Many others read poetry silently in private for their own benefit. Nursery rhymes are one of the important means by which children learn the vocabulary and rhythms of our language. Poems that are set to music and sung aloud are especially powerful. "The Star-Spangled Banner" by Francis Scott Key (1779–1843), who wrote the poem during the Battle of Fort McHenry in the War of 1812, is our national anthem and is sung before sports competitions and many other events. More recently, musical groups like the Beatles and U2, along with singer Bruce Springsteen, have given poetic expression to ideas that huge masses of people have taken to heart. Ever since the 1960s, people devoted to civil rights have been unified and strengthened by the simple lyrics of "We Shall Overcome," based on a Gospel hymn by Charles Albert Tindley (1851–1933), not only in the United States but throughout the world. During the national crisis following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, many people turned to "America the Beautiful" and "God Bless America" as songs that stir the heart. The strength and vitality of poetry could be similarly documented time and time again.

How to Read a Poem

With poetry, as with any other literary form, the more effort we put into understanding, the greater will be our reward. Poems are often about subjects that we have never experienced directly. We have never met the poet, never had his or her exact experiences, and never thought about things in exactly the same way. To

recapture the experience of the poem, we need to understand the language, ideas, attitudes, and frames of reference that bring the poem to life.

We must therefore read all poems carefully, thoughtfully, sympathetically. The economy and compression of poetry mean that every part of the poem must carry some of the impact and meaning, and thus every part repays careful attention. Try to interact with the poem. Do not expect the poem (or the poet) to do all the work. The poem contributes its language, imagery, rhythms, ideas, and all the other aspects that make it poetry; but you, the reader, will need to open your mind and your heart to the poem's impact. You have to use your imagination and let it happen.

There is no single technique for reading, absorbing, and appreciating poetry. In Part 1 we offer a number of guidelines for studying any work of literature (pp. 13–32). In addition to following the guidelines, read each poem more than once and keep in mind these objectives.

1. **Read straight through to get a general sense of the poem.** In this first reading, do not stop to puzzle out hard passages or obscure words; just read through from beginning to end. The poem is probably not as hard as you might at first think.

2. **Try to understand the poem's meaning and organization.** As you read and reread the poem, study these elements.

- *The title.* The title is almost always informative. The title of Collins's "Schoolsville" suggests that the poem will contain a somewhat flippant treatment of school life. The title of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" suggests that the poem will present ideas derived from a natural scene of cold and darkness.
- *The speaker.* Poems are dramatic, having points of view just like prose fiction. First-person speakers talk from the "inside" because they are directly involved in the action (like the speaker in Collins's "Schoolsville"). Other speakers are "outside" observers demonstrating the third-person limited and omniscient points of view, as in the anonymous "Sir Patrick Spens" (see also Chapter 2 on point of view).
- *The meanings of all words, whether familiar or unfamiliar.* The words in many poems are immediately clear, as in Herrick's "Here a Pretty Baby Lies," but other poems may contain unfamiliar words and references and you may need to consult dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other sources until you gain a grasp of the poem's content. If you have difficulty with meanings even after using your sources, ask your instructor for help.
- *The poem's setting and situation.* Some poems establish their settings and circumstances vividly. Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (p. 655) describes an evening scene in which the speaker stops his sleigh by a woods so that he can watch snow falling amid the trees. Although not all poems are so clear, you should learn as much as you can about setting and situation in every poem you read.
- *The poem's basic form and development.* Some poems, like the anonymous "Sir Patrick Spens," are narratives; others, like Jim Northrup's "Ogichidag," are personal statements; still others may be speeches to another person, like Herrick's "Here a Pretty Baby Lies." The poems may be laid out in a sonnet form or may develop in two-line sequences (couplets). They may contain stanzas, as in Mueller's "Hope," each unified by a particular action or thought. Try to determine the form and to trace the way in which the poem unfolds, part by part.
- *The poem's subject and theme.* The subject indicates the general or specific topic, while the theme refers to the idea or ideas that the poem explores. Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" announces its subject in the title. However, you must usually infer the theme. Jarrell's theme is the repulsive ugliness of war, the poignancy of untimely death, the callousness of the living toward the dead, and the suddenness with which war forces young people to face cruelty and horror.

3. **Read the poem aloud, sounding each word clearly.** Although this step may seem unnecessary, reading aloud will enable you to judge the effect of sound, rhythm, and rhyme. If you read Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" aloud, for example, you will notice the impact of rhyming *froze* with *hose* and the suggestion of the percussive sounds of cannon fire in the repeated and rhyming *l*, *a*, and *k* sounds of *black flak.* (For a more detailed consideration of sounds in poetry, see Chapter 17.)

4. **Prepare a paraphrase of the poem, and make an explication of the ideas and themes.** A paraphrase (discussed later in this chapter) is a restatement of the poem in your own words, which helps crystallize your understanding. An explication, which is both explanation and interpretation, goes beyond paraphrase to consider significance—either of brief passages or of the entire poem.

Studying Poetry

Let us now look in detail at a poem, in this case one that tells a story. It was composed as a song, or ballad, sometime during the late Middle Ages or early Renaissance, when most people got information about the outside world from strolling balladeers who sang the news to them (there were no newspapers, and besides, few people could read anyway). It tells a story that is probably true, or at least that is based on a real event.

ANONYMOUS

Sir Patrick Spens (fifteenth century)

The king sits in Dumferline° town,
Drinking the blood-red wine:
"O where will I get a good sailor
To sail this ship of mine?"

Up and spoke an eldern° knight — *old, senior* 5
Sat° at the king's right knee: — *who sat*
"Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor
That sails upon the sea."

°1 *Dumferline:* a town on the Firth of Forth, in Scotland.

The king has written a braid° letter — *large, commanding*
10 And signed it wi'° his hand, — *with*
And sent it to Sir Patrick Spens,
Was° walking on the sand. — *who was*

The first line that Sir Patrick read,
A loud laugh laughèd he;
15 The next line that Sir Patrick read,
A tear blinded his eye.

"O who is this has° done this deed, — *who has*
This ill deed done to me,
To send me out this time o'° the year, — *of*
20 To sail upon the sea?

"Make haste, make haste, my merry men all,
Our good ship sails the morn."° — *in the morning*
"O say not so, my master dear,
For I fear a deadly storm.

25 Late late yestere'en° I saw the new moon — *yesterday evening*
With the old moon in her arm,
And I fear, I fear, my dear master,
That we will come to harm."

O our Scots nobles were right loath
30 To wet their cork-heeled shoon,° — *shoes*
But long ere a'° the play were played — *all*
Their hats they swam aboon.° — *about [in the water]*

O long, long may their ladies sit
Wi' their fans into their hand,
35 Or e'er they see Sir Patrick Spens
Come sailing to the land.

O long, long may the ladies stand,
Wi' their gold combs in their hair,
Waiting for their own dear lords,
40 For they'll see them no more.

Half o'er, half o'er to Aberdour°
It's fifty fathom deep,
And there lies good Sir Patrick Spens,
Wi' the Scots lords at his feet.

°41 *Aberdour*: Aberdeen, on the east coast of Scotland on the North Sea, about 80 miles north of Dumferline.

QUESTIONS

1. What action does the poem describe? Who are the principal individual figures? What groups of people are involved with and concerned about the action?

2. What do you learn about the principal figure, Sir Patrick Spens? Why does he follow the king's orders rather than his own judgment?
3. What conflicts do you find in the poem? Do they seem personal or political?
4. What emotions are conveyed in the last two stanzas? Since the poem does not explain why the king sends Sir Patrick and his men to sea, how might the emotions have been expressed more strongly?
5. Describe the poem's use of dialogue. How many people speak? How do the speeches assist in conveying the poem's action?

"Sir Patrick Spens" is a **narrative ballad.** A **narrative** tells a story, and the term **ballad** defines the poem's shape or form, which was originally a song for dancing (related to our word *ballet*). The first two stanzas set up the situation: The king needs a captain and crew to undertake a vital mission, and an old knight—one of the king's close advisers—suggests Sir Patrick Spens, who is obviously distinguished and reliable. The rest of the poem focuses on the feelings and eventual death of Sir Patrick and his men. The third stanza provides a transition from the king to Sir Patrick. The king orders Sir Patrick to embark on an important sea voyage, and Sir Patrick reads the order. At first he laughs—probably bitterly, because Sir Patrick's response is that an order to go to sea during an obvious time of danger is nothing more than a grim joke. But when he realizes that the order is real, he foresees disaster. Our sense of impending calamity is increased when we learn that Sir Patrick's crewmen are also frightened (lines 23–28).

The shipwreck, described in the eighth stanza, is presented with ironic understatement. There is no description of the storm or of the crew's panic, nor does the speaker describe the masts splitting or the ship sinking under the waves. Although these horrors are omitted, the floating hats are grim evidence of destruction and death. The remainder of the poem continues in this vein of understatement. In the ninth and tenth stanzas the focus shifts back to the land, and to the ladies who will wait a "long, long" time (forever) for Sir Patrick and his men to return. The poem ends with a vision of Sir Patrick and the "Scots lords" lying "fifty fathom deep."

On first reflection, "Sir Patrick Spens" tells a sad tale without complications. The subject seems to describe no more than Sir Patrick's drowning, along with his crew and the Scots noblemen. One might therefore claim that the poem does not have a clear theme. Even the irony of the floating hats and the waiting ladies is straightforward and unambiguous.

However, you might consider how the poem appeals to our imaginations through its suggestions of the contradictions and conflicts between authority and individuals. Sir Patrick knows the danger, yet he still obeys the king. In addition, in lines 5, 17–20, and 31, there is a suggestion of political infighting. The "eldern knight" is in effect responsible for dooming the ship. Moreover, the "play" being "played" suggests that a political game is happening beyond the grim game of the men caught in the deadly storm (if Sir Patrick knows the danger, would not the knight also know it, and would not this knight also know the consequences of choosing Sir Patrick?). These political motives are not spelled out, but they are implied. Thus the poem is not only a sad tale but also a poignant dramatization of how power operates, of how a loyal person responds to a tragic dilemma, and of the pitiful consequences of that response.

In reading poetry, then, let the poem be your guide. Get all the words, try to understand dramatic situations, follow the emotional cues the poet gives you, and try to explain everything that is happening. Let the poem trigger your imagination. If you find implications that you believe are important, as with the political overtones of "Sir Patrick Spens," use details from the poem to support your observations. Resist the temptation to "uncover" unusual or far-fetched elements in the poem (for example, that hope is a tiny spirit that inhabits human beings, trees, and vegetables, or that the "man he killed" was literally the speaker's brother). Draw only those conclusions that the poem itself supports.

Poems for Study

Gwendolyn Brooks . . . . . The Mother, 652
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GWENDOLYN BROOKS (1917–2000)

The Mother (1945)

Abortions will not let you forget.
You remember the children you got that you did not get,
The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,
The singers and workers that never handled the air.
You will never neglect or beat 5
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye. 10

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children.
I have contracted. I have eased
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.
I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized
Your luck
And your lives from your unfinished reach, 15
If I stole your births and your names,
Your straight baby tears and your games,
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches, and your deaths,
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate. 20
Though why should I whine,
Whine that the crime was other than mine?—
Since anyhow you are dead.
Or rather, or instead,
You were never made. 25
But that too, I am afraid,
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?
You were born, you had body, you died.
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

Believe me, I loved you all. 30
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you
All.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the circumstances of the speaker. Who is she? What is the topic of her narrative? What has happened to her? What thoughts and feelings does she express about her experiences? Why does she say "how is the truth to be said" (line 28)?
2. What is the topic of this poem? What moral and political issues does the poem raise?
3. What conclusions do you think the poet wants you to draw from this poem? What "pro" and "con" positions might be derived from the poem?
4. Considering this poem, discuss what topical material might be imposed on writers of poetry? What might be considered "poetic" subject matter?

EMILY DICKINSON (1830–1886)

For a photo, see Chapter 21, page 1052.

Because I Could Not Stop for Death (1890; c.1863)°

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

°First published, 1890; written c. 1863. You will see two dates given for many poems in the book.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer,° my Gown—
My Tippet°—only Tulle°—

°Gossamer: thin fabric
°Tippet: cape, scarf; °Tulle: thin silk

We passed before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker, and what is she like? Why couldn't she stop for Death? What perspective does her present position give the poem?
2. In what unusual ways does the poem characterize death?
3. What does the carriage represent? Where is it headed? Who are the riders? What is meant by the things the carriage passes?
4. What is represented by the house in line 17? Why does the poet use the word "House" in preference to some other word?

ROBERT FRANCIS (1901–1987)

Catch (1950)

Two boys uncoached are tossing a poem together,
Overhand, underhand, backhand, sleight of hand, every hand,
Teasing with attitudes, latitudes, interludes, altitudes,
High, make him fly off the ground for it, low, make him stoop,
Make him scoop it up, make him as-almost-as-possible miss it,
Fast, let him sting from it, now, fool him slowly,
Anything, everything tricky, risky, nonchalant,
Anything under the sun to outwit the prosy,

Over the tree and the long sweet cadence down,
Over his head, make him scramble to pick up the meaning,
And now, like a posy, a pretty one plump in his hands.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the language of "Catch." How does the poet establish that there are two meanings to most of the words in the game of catch played by the "boys"?
2. How accurately does the poem describe a game of ordinary catch in which the participants are throwing a baseball? How interesting would a game of catch be if the participants stood still and merely threw the ball back and forth to each other? How interesting would poetry be if the poet did not create variety just as the catch players vary their throws?
3. How well does the analogy of the game of catch explain why poetry sometimes requires extra efforts of understanding?

ROBERT FROST (1874–1963)

For a photo, see Chapter 21, page 1087.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (1923)

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

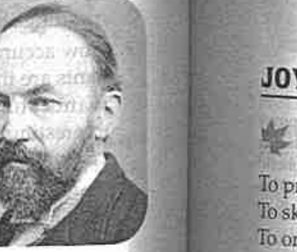
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

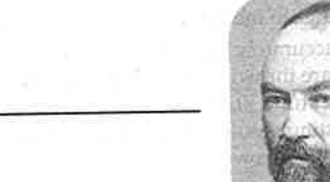
The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

QUESTIONS

1. What do we learn about the speaker? Where is he? What is he doing?
2. What is the setting (place, weather, time) of this poem?

3. Why does the speaker want to watch the "woods fill up with snow"?
4. What evidence suggests that the speaker is embarrassed or self-conscious about stopping? Consider the words "though" in line 2 and "must" in line 5.
5. The last stanza offers two alternative attitudes and courses of action. What are they? Which does the speaker choose?





THOMAS HARDY (1840–1928)

The Man He Killed (1902)

"Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!° *half-pint cup*

"But ranged as infantry, (5)
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

"I shot him dead because—
Because he was my foe. (10)
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

"He thought he'd 'list,° perhaps, *enlist*
Off-hand like—just as I—
Was out of work—had sold his traps°— (15) *possessions*
No other reason why.

"Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown."° (20)

°20 *half-a-crown:* at the time, the equivalent of $20 or $30.

QUESTIONS

1. Who and what is the speaker? What do you learn about him from his language?
2. What situation and event is the speaker recalling and relating?

3. What is the effect produced by repeating the word "because" in lines 9 and 10 and using the word "although" in line 12?
4. What is the speaker's attitude toward his "foe" and toward what he has done?
5. What point, if any, does this poem make about war? How are this poem and Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" similar and different?

JOY HARJO (b. 1951)

Eagle Poem (1990)

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear, (5)
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning (10)
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care (15)
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a (20)
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty. (25)
In beauty.

QUESTIONS

1. What is meant by the requirement that "to pray you open your whole self/To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon"? What is the meaning of lines 4–9?
2. Why is the eagle significant to the speaker? Of what importance is the figure that the eagle makes?
3. Why does the poet repeat the phrase "In beauty" at the poem's end?

RANDALL JARRELL (1914–1965)

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner° (1945)

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.°
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak° and the nightmare fighters.
5 When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

°*Ball Turret Gunner:* High-altitude bombers in World War II (1941–1945) contained a revolvable gun turret both at the top and at the bottom, from which a machine-gunner could shoot at attacking fighter planes. Gunners in these turrets were sometimes mutilated by the gunfire of attacking planes. 2 *froze:* The stratospheric below-zero temperatures caused the moisture in the gunner's breath to freeze as it contacted the collar of his flight jacket. 4 *flak:* the round, black explosions of antiaircraft shells fired at bombers from the ground, an acronym of the German word *Fliegerabwehrkanone*.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker? Where has he been, and what has he been doing? What has happened to him?
2. In the first line, what is the poet saying about the age of the speaker and the opportunities he had for living before he was killed? How may this line be read politically and polemically?
3. What is a turret? What is your response to the last line?

BEN JONSON (1573–1637)

On My First Daughter° (1616)

Here lies, to each her parents' ruth,°
Mary, the daughter of their youth:
Yet all heaven's gifts, being heaven's due,
It makes the father less, to rue.°
5 At six month's end, she parted hence
With safety of her innocence;
Whose soul heaven's Queen (whose name she bears),
In comfort of her mother's tears,
Hath placed amongst her virgin-train:°
10 Where, while that severed° doth remain,
This grave partakes° the fleshly birth,
Which cover lightly, gentle earth.

°*On My First Daughter:* Jonson's infant daughter, Mary, died at the age of six months, but the year of her death is unknown. The poem was included in the 1616 edition of Jonson's *Epigrams*. 1 *ruth:* sadness, grief 3–4. *Yet . . . rue:* i.e., because all heaven's gifts are [still] owned by heaven, the child's death takes from me, her father, a cause of mourning. 7–9 *Whose soul . . . virgin-train:* i.e., to comfort the tears of her mother, the Queen of heaven, after whom [my daughter] was named, has placed her soul among her [Mary's] virgin-train. 10 *that severed:* the child's soul, which at death is separated from the body. 11 *partakes:* contains the infant's body [until the Resurrection].

QUESTIONS

1. What is the situation of this poem? How does the speaker reconcile himself to the death of his infant daughter?
2. Compare this poem with Herrick's "Here a Pretty Baby Lies" (p. 645).

EMMA LAZARUS (1849–1887)

The New Colossus (1883)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,°
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
5 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.°
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
10 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

°1 *brazen giant of Greek fame:* the statue of Apollo that stood at the harbor of ancient Rhodes, an island in the Aegean Sea. Known as the "Colossus," it was sheathed in copper, and it was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. 8 *The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame:* "The air-bridged harbor that is framed by the twin cities [of New York and Newark, New Jersey]."

QUESTIONS

1. Why does the poem open with the word "Not"? What argument is introduced by the use of this word and its contrast with the Statue of Liberty? How is this argument brought out throughout the sonnet? Why is this poem always associated with the Statue of Liberty?
2. What does "golden door" mean about the United States? Why does the poet use the name "Mother of Exiles" in reference to the statue? How is "golden" (line 14) to be contrasted with "brazen" (line 1)?
3. What is meant by the "New Colossus"? How does the poem present an optimistic view for the "huddled masses" that will come to the United States to "breathe free"?

LOUIS MACNEICE (1907–1963)

Snow (1935)

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was
Spawning snow and pink roses against it

Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:
World is suddener than we fancy it.

World is crazier and more of it than we think, 5
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.

And the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world
Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes— 10
On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands—
There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.

QUESTIONS

1. Where is the speaker at the time of the poem? What is the contrast between the roses and the snow? Why is this contrast important?
2. What words describe snow in lines 1–3? What words in lines 4, 5, 6, 8, 10 describe the world generally? Why does the speaker choose these words rather than more descriptive ones?
3. What does the last line suggest?
4. What similarities and differences do you find between "Snow" and Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (p. 655)?

JIM NORTHRUP (b. 1943)

Ogichidag° (1993)

I was born in war, WW Two.
Listened as the old men told stories
of getting gassed in the trenches, WW One.
Saw my uncles come back from
Guadalcanal, North Africa, 5
and the Battle of the Bulge.
Memorized the war stories
my cousins told of Korea.
Felt the fear in their voices.
Finally it was my turn, 10
my brothers too.
Joined the marines in time
for the Cuban Missile Crisis.
Heard the crack of rifles
in the rice paddies south of Da Nang. 15
Watched my friends die there
then tasted the bitterness of
the only war America ever lost.

°The title "Ogichidag" is the Ojibway word for "warriors."

My son is now a warrior.
Will I listen to his war stories
or cry into his open grave? 20

QUESTIONS

1. What battles are mentioned in the poem, and over what period of time do these battles extend?
2. How does the speaker state that he learned about the battles? Why is this method of gaining knowledge important? What experience has the speaker had with war?
3. Why does the speaker finish the poem by referring to his son? In relationship to the poem's structure, why is the concluding question important?

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE (b. 1952)

Where Children Live (1982)

Homes where children live exude a pleasant rumpledness,
like a bed made by a child, or a yard littered with balloons.

To be a child again one would need to shed details
till the heart found itself dressed in the coat with a hood.
Now the heart has taken on gloves and mufflers, 5
the heart never goes outside to find something to "do."
And the house takes on a new face, dignified.
No lost shoes blooming under bushes.
No chipped trucks in the drive.
Grown-ups like swings, leafy plants, slow-motion back and forth. 10
While the yard of a child is strewn with the corpses
of bottle-rockets and whistles,
anything whizzing and spectacular, brilliantly short-lived.

Trees in children's yards speak in clearer tongues.
Ants have more hope. Squirrels dance as well as hide. 15
The fence has a reason to be there, so children can go in and out.
Even when the children are at school, the yards glow
with the leftovers of their affection,
the roots of the tiniest grasses curl toward one another
like secret smiles. 20

QUESTIONS

1. How accurately does the poem present the "pleasant rumpledness" of children?
2. What is the speaker's view of the comparative dependence or independence of children? What does the speaker think of children?
3. Sometimes poems about children can be overly sentimental. How well does this poem present sentiment about children? Does it go too far, or is it about right?

OCTAVIO PAZ (1914–1998)

Two Bodies (Dos Cuerpos) (1944)

Translated by Muriel Rukeyser

Two bodies face to face
are at times two waves
and night is an ocean.

Two bodies face to face
are at times two stones 5
and night a desert.

Two bodies face to face
are at times two roots
laced into night.

Two bodies face to face 10
are at times two knives
and night strikes sparks.

Two bodies face to face
are two stars falling
in an empty sky. 15

QUESTIONS

1. What does the speaker mean by "two bodies face to face" in each of the first lines of the stanzas?
2. Which of the stanzas might be considered positive descriptions of personal relationships? Which might be negative? Which comparisons suggest love? Which comparisons suggest anger? Which comparisons suggest indifference?
3. What is meant by "roots" that are "laced into night"?

PHIL RIZZUTO (1917–2007)

They Own the Wind (1978)

I tell ya,
did you take notice of the flag?
I couldn't believe it.
just as Jim Rice° came to the plate,
the wind started blowing to left field. 5
it not only helped Yastrzemski's° homer,
but it hurt Jackson's,°

°4 *Jim Rice:* Red Sox outfielder (b. 1953). 6 *Yastrzemski:* Carl Yastrzemski (b. 1939), Red Sox outfielder. 7 *Jackson:* Reggie Jackson (b. 1946), Yankee outfielder.

the wind was blowing to right field
when Jackson hit the fly ball,
when Yaz hit the homer
the wind was blowing to left field, 10
kept it from going foul.
strike one to Piniella.°
somebody told me
the Red Sox control the elements up here
I didn't believe 'em until today 15

°13 *Piniella:* Lou Piniella (b. 1943), Yankee outfielder, cited as manager of the Cubs in 2010.

QUESTIONS

1. An example of "found poetry," this poem was "spoken" when Rizzuto was announcing a game between the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox on October 2, 1978. On the basis of this poem, define what is meant by "found poetry." In what way should this be considered poetry?
2. What observations about the "elements" does Rizzuto make with regard to the winds at Boston's Fenway Park? How does he transform ordinary complaints about weather into something amusing?

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616)

For a portrait, see Chapter 24, page 1354.

Sonnet 55: Not Marble, Nor the Gilded Monuments (1609)

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn, 5
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor° Mars his° sword nor war's quick fire shall burn — *Neither, Mars's*
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room 10
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.° — *Judgment Day*
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker of the poem, and who is being addressed?
2. What powers of destruction does the speaker mention? What, according to the speaker, will survive these powers?

3. What does "the living record of your memory" (line 8) mean?
4. What is the poem's subject? Theme?

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792–1822)

To—("Music, When Soft Voices Die") 1824

Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrates in the memory;
Odors, when sweet violets sicken,
Live within the sense they quicken.° — *make vibrantly alive*

5 Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heaped for the belovèd's bed;
And so thy thoughts,° when thou art gone, — *this shall also happen to thy thoughts*
Love itself shall slumber on.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the topic of this poem? What view of reality is the poet describing? What is the purpose of the words *die*, *sicken*, *dead*, and *art gone*? If music, odors, roses, and thoughts are no longer alive in actuality, in what sense do they continue to live?
2. What is meant by the phrase "shall slumber on" (line 8)? How can love slumber on, but not die? What is the connection between love slumbering and the memory of music, the sense of the odors of violets, and the heaping of rose leaves on the marriage bed?
3. In what way does the speaker praise the thoughts of the listener?

ELAINE TERRANOVA (b. 1939)

Rush Hour (1995)

Odd, the baby's scabbed face peeking over
the woman's shoulder. The little girl
at her side with her arm in a cast,
wearing a plain taffeta party dress.
5 The woman herself who is in shorts and sunglasses
among commuters in the underground station. Her body
that sags and tenses at the same time.

The little girl has not once moved
to touch her or to be touched.
10 Even on the train, she never turns and says,
"Mommy." Sunlight bobs over her blond head
inclining toward the window. The baby
is excited now. "Loo, loo, loo, loo,"
he calls, a wet crescendo. "He's pulling
15 my hair," the little girl at last cries out.

A kind man comes up the aisle to see
the baby. He stares at those rosettes of blood
and wants to know what's wrong with him.
The woman says a dog bit him. "It must have been
a big dog, then." "Oh, no. A neighbor's little dog."
20 The man says, "I hope they put that dog to sleep."
The woman is nearly pleading. "It was an accident. He didn't
mean to do it." The conductor, taking tickets,

asks the little girl how she broke her arm.
But the child looks out to the big, shaded houses.
25 The woman says, "She doesn't like to talk
about that." No one has seen what is behind
her own dark glasses. She pulls the children to her.
Maybe she is thinking of the arm raised over them,
Its motion that would begin like a blessing.
30

QUESTIONS

1. What clues early in the poem indicate that the woman and her children are victims of domestic abuse?
2. Why does the mother not appeal for help when the two men, the "kind man" and the conductor, inquire about the injuries of the children? What is the irony of the raised arm in the last two lines? What is the pathos of the mother's situation?
3. Describe the attitude of the speaker telling the story of the poem. Why does the speaker do no more than describe details, and not actually rail against domestic abuse?

WRITING A PARAPHRASE OF A POEM (PARAGRAPH LENGTH)

Paraphrasing is especially useful in the study of poetry. It fixes both the general shape and the details of a poem in your mind, and it also reveals the poetic devices at work. A comparison of the original poem with the paraphrase highlights the techniques and the language that make the poem effective.

To paraphrase a poem, rewrite it in prose, in your own words. Decide what details to include—a number that you determine partly by the length of the poem and partly by the total length of your paraphrase. When you deal with lyrics, sonnets, and other short poems, you may include all the details, and thus your paraphrase may be as long as the work, or longer. Paraphrases of long poems, however, will be shorter than the originals because some details must be summarized briefly while others may be cut entirely.

It is vital to make your paraphrase accurate and also to use *only your own words*. To make sure that your words are all your own, read through the poem several times. Then, put the poem out of sight and write your paraphrase. Once you have finished, check yourself both for accuracy and vocabulary. If you find that you have borrowed too many of the poem's words, choose other

words that mean the same thing, or else use quotation marks to set off the original words (but do not overuse quotations).

Above all, remain faithful to the poem, but *avoid drawing conclusions and giving unnecessary explanations*. It would be wrong in a paraphrase of Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," for example, to state, "This poem makes a forceful argument against the brutal and wasteful deaths caused by war." This assertion states the poem's *theme*, but it *does not* describe the poem's actual content.

Organizing Your Paraphrase

The organization of your paraphrase should reflect the poem's form or development. Include material in the order in which it occurs. With short poems, organize your paraphrase to reflect the poem's development line by line or stanza by stanza. In paraphrasing Shakespeare's "Not Marble, Nor the Gilded Monuments," for example, you should deal with each four-line group in sequence and then consider the final couplet. With longer poems, look for natural divisions such as groups of related stanzas, verse paragraphs, or other possible organizational units. In every situation, the poem's shape should determine the form of your paraphrase.

Illustrative Student Paraphrase

A Paraphrase of Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed"°

[1] If the man I killed had met me in a bar, we would have sat down together and had many drinks. But because we belonged to armies of warring foot soldiers lined up on a battlefield, we shot at each other, and my shot killed him.

[2] The reason I killed him, I think, was that he and I were enemies—just that. But as I think of it, I realize that he had enlisted exactly as I did. Maybe he did it on a whim, or maybe he had lost his job and sold everything he owned. There was no other reason to enlist.

[3] Being at war is unusual and strange. Instead of buying a man a drink, or helping him out with a little money, you have to kill him.

°This poem appears on page 656.

Commentary on the Paraphrase

Because Hardy's poem is short, the paraphrase attempts to include all its details. The organization closely follows the poem's development. Paragraph 1, for example, restates the contents of the first two stanzas. Paragraph 2 restates the third and fourth stanzas. Finally, the last paragraph separately paraphrases the last stanza, which contains the reflections made by the poem's "I" speaker. This paragraph concludes the paraphrase just as the last stanza concludes the poem.

Notice that the essay does not abstract details from the poem, such as "The dead man might have become a good friend in peacetime" in paraphrasing stanza 5; nor does it extend details, such as "We would have gotten acquainted, had drinks together, told many stories, and done a lot of laughing" for stanza 1 (both stanzas, however, actually do suggest these details). Although the paraphrase reflects the poem's strong antiwar sentiments, an interpretive sentence like "By his very directness, the narrator brings out the senselessness and brutality of warfare" would be out of place. What is needed is a short restatement of the poem to demonstrate the essay writer's understanding of the poem's content, and no more.

WRITING AN EXPLICATION OF A POEM (ESSAY LENGTH)

Explication goes beyond the assimilation required for a paraphrase and thus provides you with the opportunity to show your understanding. But there is no need to explain everything in the poem. A complete, or total, explication would theoretically require you to explain the meaning and implications of each word and every line—a technique that obviously would be exhaustive (and exhausting). It would also be self-defeating, for explicating everything would prohibit you from using your judgment and deciding what is important.

A more manageable and desirable technique is therefore the general explication, which devotes attention to the meaning of individual parts in relationship to the entire work, as in the discussion of "Sir Patrick Spens" (p. 649). You might think of a general explication as your explanation or "reading" of the poem. Because it does not require you to go into exhaustive detail, you will need to be selective and to consider only those details that are significant in themselves and vital to your own thematic development.

Questions for Discovering Ideas

- What does the title contribute to the reader's understanding?
- Who is speaking? Where is the speaker when the poem is happening?
- What is the situation? What has happened in the past, or what is happening in the present, that has brought about the speech?
- What difficult, special, or unusual words does the poem contain? What references need explaining? How does an explanation assist in the understanding of the poem?
- How does the poem develop? Is it a personal statement? Is it a story?
- What is the main idea of the poem? What details make possible the formulation of the main idea?

Strategies for Organizing Ideas

Your general explication demonstrates your ability to (1) follow the essential details of the poem (the same as in a paraphrase), (2) understand the issues and the meaning the poem reveals, (3) explain some of the relationships of content to technique, and (4) note and discuss especially important or unique aspects of the poem.

In your introduction, use your central idea to express a general view of the poem, which your essay will bear out. The discussion of the anonymous "Sir Patrick Spens" (p. 649) suggests some possible central ideas—namely, that (1) the poem highlights a conflict between self-preservation and obedience to authority, and (2) innocent people may be caught in political infighting. In the following illustrative student essay explicating Hardy's "The Man He Killed," the central idea is that war is senseless.

In the body of your essay, first explain the poem's content—not with a paraphrase but with a description of the poem's major organizing elements. Hence, if the speaker of the poem is "inside" the poem as a first-person involved "I," you do not need to reproduce this voice yourself in your description. Instead, *describe* the poem in your own words, with whatever brief introductory phrases you find necessary, as in the second paragraph of the illustrative essay that follows.

Next, explicate the poem in relation to your central idea. Choose *your own* order of discussion, depending on your topics. You should, however, keep stressing your central idea with each new topic. Thus, you might wish to follow your description by discussing the poem's meaning, or even by presenting two or more possible interpretations.

You might also wish to refer to significant techniques. For example, in the anonymous "Sir Patrick Spens," a noteworthy technique is the unintroduced quotations (i.e., quotations appearing without any "he said" or "quoth he" phrases) as the ballad writer's means of dramatizing the commands and responses of Sir Patrick and his doomed crew. You might also introduce special topics, such as the crewman who explains that there will be bad luck because the new moon has "the old moon in her arm" (line 26). Such a reference to superstition might include the explanation of the crewman's assumptions, the relationship of his uneasiness to the remainder of the poem, and also how the ballad writer keeps the narrative brief. In short, discuss those aspects of meaning and technique that bear upon your central idea.

In your conclusion, you may repeat your major idea to reinforce your essay's thematic structure. Because your essay is a general explication, there will be parts of the poem that you will not have discussed. You might therefore mention what might be gained from an exhaustive discussion of various parts of the poem (do not, however, begin to exhaust any subject in the conclusion of your essay). The last stanza of Hardy's "The Man He Killed," for example, contains the words "quaint and curious" in reference to war. These words are unusual, particularly because the speaker might have chosen *hateful, senseless, destructive,* or other similarly descriptive words. Why did Hardy have his speaker make such a choice? With brief attention to such a problem, you may conclude your essay.

Illustrative Student Essay

Although underlined sentences are not recommended by MLA style, they are used in this illustrative essay as teaching tools to emphasize the central idea, thesis sentence, and topic sentences.

Lagerstrom 1

Steven Lagerstrom

Professor Bonner

English 110

22 September 2010

An Explication of Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed"°

[1] Hardy's "The Man He Killed" deals with the senselessness of war.* It does this through a silent contrast between the needs of ordinary people, as represented by a young man—the speaker—who has killed an enemy soldier in battle, and the antihuman and unnatural deaths of war. Of major note in this contrast are the speaker's circumstances, his language, his sense of identity with the dead man, and his concerns and wishes.†

[2] The speaker begins by contrasting the circumstances of warfare with those of peace. He does not identify himself, but his speech reveals that he is common and ordinary—a person who enjoys drinking in a bar and who prefers friendship and helpfulness to violence. If he and the man he killed had met in an inn, he says, they would have shared many drinks; but because they met on a battlefield they shot at each other, and he killed the other man. The speaker tries to justify the killing but can produce no stronger reason than that the dead man was his "foe." Once he states this reason, he again thinks of the similarities between himself and the dead man, and then he concludes that warfare is "quaint and curious" (line 17) because it forces a man to kill another man whom he would have befriended if they had met during peacetime.

[3] To make the irony of warfare clear, the poem uses easy, everyday language to bring out the speaker's ordinary qualities. His manner of speech is conversational, as in "We should have sat us down" (3),

°This poem appears on page 656.
*Central idea.
†Thesis sentence.

Lagerstrom 2

"'list" (for "enlist," 13), and his use of "you" in the last stanza. Also, his word choices, shown in words like "nipperkin," "traps," and "fellow" (4, 15, and 18), are common and informal, at least in British usage. This language is important because it establishes that the speaker is an average man whom war has thrown into an unnatural role.

[4] As another means of stressing the stupidity of war, the poem makes clear that the two men—the live soldier who killed and the dead soldier who was killed—were so alike that they could have been brothers or even twins. They had similar ways of life, similar economic troubles, similar wishes to help other people, and similar motives in enlisting in the army. Symbolically, the "man he killed" is the speaker himself, and hence the killing may be considered a form of suicide. The poem thus raises the question of why two people who are almost identical should be shoved into opposing battle lines in order to kill each other. This question is rhetorical, for the obvious answer is that there is no good reason.

[5] Because the speaker (and also, very likely, the dead man) is shown as a person embodying the virtues of friendliness and helpfulness, Hardy's poem is a strong disapproval of war. Clearly, political reasons for violence as policy are irrelevant to the characters and concerns of the men who fight. They, like the speaker, would prefer to follow their own needs rather than remote and meaningless ideals. The failure of complex but irrelevant political explanations is brought out most clearly in the third stanza, in which the speaker tries to give a reason for shooting the other man. Hardy's use of punctuation—the dashes—stresses the fact that the speaker has no commitment to the cause he served when killing. Thus the speaker stops at the word "because—" and gropes for a reason (9). Not being articulate, he can say only "Because he was my foe. / Just so: my foe of course he was; / That's clear enough" (10–12). These short bursts of words indicate that he cannot explain things to himself or to anyone else except in the most obvious and trite terms, and in apparent embarrassment he inserts "of course" as a way of emphasizing hostility even though he clearly felt none toward the man he killed.

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[6] A reading thus shows the power of the poem's dramatic argument. Hardy does not establish closely detailed reasons against war as a policy but rather dramatizes the idea that all political arguments are unimportant in view of the central and glaring brutality of war—killing. Hardy's speaker is not able to express deep feelings; rather he is confused because he is an average sort who wants only to live and let live and to enjoy a drink in a bar with friends. But this very commonness stresses the point that everyone is victimized by war—both those who die and those who kill. The poem is a powerful argument for peace and reconciliation.

Lagerstrom 4

Work Cited

Hardy, Thomas. "The Man He Killed." *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*. Ed. Edgar V. Roberts and Robert Zweig. 10th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2012. 656. Print.

Commentary on the Essay

This explication begins by stating a central idea about "The Man He Killed," then indicates the topics to follow that will develop the idea. Although nowhere does the speaker state that war is senseless, the illustrative essay takes the position that the poem embodies this idea. A more detailed examination of the poem's themes might develop the idea by discussing the ways in which individuals are caught up in social and political forces, or the contrast between individuality and the state. In this essay, however, the simple statement of the idea is enough.

Paragraph 2 describes the major details of the poem, with guiding phrases like "The speaker begins," "he says," and "he again thinks." Thus the paragraph goes over the poem, like a paraphrase, but explains how things occur, as is appropriate for an explication. Paragraph 3 is devoted to the speaker's words and idioms, with the idea that his conversational manner is part of the poem's contrasting method of

argument. If these brief references to style were more detailed, this topic could be more fully developed as an aspect of Hardy's implied argument against war.

Paragraph 4 extends paragraph 3 inasmuch as it points out the similarities of the speaker and the man he killed. If the situation were reversed, the dead man might say exactly the same things about the present speaker. This affinity underscores the suicidal nature of war. Paragraph 5 treats the style of the poem's fourth stanza. In this context, the treatment is brief. The last paragraph reiterates the main idea and concludes with a tribute to the poem as an argument.

The entire essay therefore represents a reading and explanation of the poem's high points. It stresses a particular interpretation and briefly shows how various aspects of the poem bear it out.

Writing Topics About the Nature of Poetry

Writing Paragraphs

1. Skim the titles of poems listed in the table of contents of this book. Judging by the subjects of these poems, in a paragraph, describe and discuss the possible range of subject matter for poetry. What topics seem most suitable? Why? Do any topics seem to be ruled out? Why?
2. Besides the subject matter of the poems in this chapter, in a paragraph, describe what additional subject matter you would suggest as possible topics for poems?
3. In a paragraph, describe how accurate the proposition is that poetry is a particularly compressed form of expression. To support your position, you might refer to one of the following poems: "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," Francis's "Catch," Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," or Shelley's "Music, When Soft Voices Die."

Writing Essays

1. Consider the subject of war as brought out in Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," Hardy's "The Man He Killed," and Northrop's "Ogichidag." What ideas are common to the poems? What ideas are distinct and unique? In an essay, on the basis of your comparison, argue that poetry is an excellent vehicle for the expression of moral and political ideas.
2. Consult the brief section on reader-response criticism in Chapter 28. Then write an essay about your responses to one poem, or a number of poems, in this chapter. Assume that your own experiences are valuable guides for your judgment. In the poems that you have read, what has had a bearing on your experiences? What in your own experiences has given you insights into the poems? Try to avoid being anecdotal; instead, try to find a relationship between your experiences and the poetry.

Creative Writing Assignment

1. Write two poems of your own about your future plans. In one, assume that the world is stable and will go on forever. In the other, assume that a large asteroid is out of orbit and is hurtling toward earth at great speed, and a collision six months from now will bring untold destruction and may even end life on earth. After composing your poems, write a brief explanation of how and why they differ in terms of language, references, and attitudes toward friends, family, country, religion, and so on.

Library Assignment

1. In the reference section of your library, find two books (anthologies, encyclopedias, introductions, dictionaries of literary terms) about the general subject of poetry. On the basis of how these two sources define and explain poetry, write a brief essay telling a person younger than you what to expect from the reading of poems.