

Chapter 13

Characters and Setting: Who, What, Where, and When in Poetry

Poets, like other writers, bring their works alive through the interactions of fictional characters who experience love and hatred, pleasure and pain, and most of the other conditions and situations of life. Just as in fiction, poetic **characters** are defined by what they say, what they do, and how they react, and also by what other characters say about them. Not all poetry is narrative, however. Hence we will study character in poems in relation to someone or something else—such as the interactions of speakers with listeners or with the reader, the inner conflicts of a speaker discussing the state of his or her spirit, and conditions such as love, hate, acceptance, disagreement, emulation, decision making, and action—brought out in personal, social, and political life.

In addition, we will examine the **setting** of a poem as one of the major means of measuring character (see Chapter 4). Poetic protagonists, like those in stories, are necessarily influenced by their possessions, the places they inhabit, the conditions of their lives, and the times in which they live. The period that people have spent in a relationship, their relative wealth or poverty, their surroundings, their social and economic circumstances—all have a bearing on their characters. Poems therefore abound with references to events and situations and also to objects, such as beaches, forests, battlefields, graveyards, coffee spoons, melons, museums, and paintings.

Characters in Poetry

The Speaker or Persona Is the Voice of the Poem

The most significant character in poetry is the **speaker**, also called the **persona** (plural *personae*, a term that comes from the Etruscan-Latin word meaning “mask”). In prose fiction, we also use *speaker* and *persona*, but we often prefer the word *narrator* because of the obvious role of storyteller. This distinction emphasizes the personal and psychological importance of poetic speakers. Sometimes the speaker is a distinct character, with individual traits and well-imagined circumstances, as in Browning’s “My Last Duchess” (this chapter), Donne’s “Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God” (Chapter 12), and Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” (this chapter). In Dickinson’s “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” (Chapter 11), the speaker is especially unique, for she states that she has been dead for hundreds of years and is now looking back from eternity to the occasion of her death.

Not all poetic speakers have separate identities, for some embody a position or stance that the poet selects to present detail or advance an argument. The poet is thus the undeniable speaker, but the voice we hear may be considered as a brief

dramatization of the poet’s personality or need. Donne in “Batter My Heart” (Chapter 12) adopts such a stance—as a supplicant or penitent praying for divine favor. In this sonnet Donne is not creating a separate dramatic character in deep religious anguish, but is expressing his own hope and fear.

Expectedly, poets use many sorts of speakers to voice their poems. In the poetry included in these chapters, there are poems spoken by kings and dukes, husbands and wives, parents and children, lovers and killers, colonels and enlisted men, shepherds and secretaries, believers and nonbelievers, commoners and members of the aristocracy, and almost every other kind of person you can imagine. In addition, you meet speakers who are mythological heroes and heroines, dead people, skeletons, machines, philosophers, lovers, former slaves, and ghosts. In fact, speakers do not have to be human; they can be animals, clouds, buildings, computers, or whatever the poet’s imagination may create.

INSIDE SPEAKERS USE THE FIRST-PERSON VOICE AND ARE INVOLVED IN THE POEM’S ACTIONS. A poetic speaker may be *inside* or *outside* the poem, depending on the point of view used by the poet (see Chapter 2). If the point of view is first person, the speaker is *inside* the poem. Here is such a poem, written by an unknown late medieval poet.

ANONYMOUS

Western Wind, When Wilt Thou Blow? (Fifteenth century?)

Western wind, when wilt thou blow?
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, if my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again.

In this poem the “my” and “I” pronouns indicate that the speaker is *inside* the poem speaking in the first person, wishing for gentle spring rain (“small rain”) and the renewal of life and love that is signaled by spring.

OUTSIDE SPEAKERS USE THE THIRD PERSON AND ARE OBJECTIVE ABOUT THE POEM’S ACTIONS. The speaker is *outside* the poem, however, if the third person is used. In such poems, the speaker is not involved with the action; he or she describes what is happening to others, as in this anonymous Scots ballad.

ANONYMOUS

Bonny George Campbell (late sixteenth century)

High upon Highlands
And low upon Tay,
Lies Lash Tay, a lake in Perth County, in central Scotland, about sixty miles north of Glasgow.

Bonny George Campbell
Rode out on a day.

5 But toom° came his saddle,
All bloody to see,
Oh, home came his good horse,
But never came he.

10 Down came his old mother,
Greeting full sair°
And down came his bonny wife,
Wringing her hair.

15 Saddled, and bridled,
And bootied rode he;
And home came his good horse,
But never came he.

20 "My meadow lies green,
And my corn is unshorn,<°
My barn is to build°
And my babe is unborn."

Saddled, and bridled,
And bootied rode he;
Toom home came the saddle,
But never came he.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you conclude about the character, social status, way of life, and feelings of the three persons mentioned in the poem?
2. What has happened to Bonny George Campbell, and how do you know?
3. Who is the speaker of the fifth stanza? What effect has Campbell's absence had on this speaker?

In this ballad the speaker limits his or her perspective to the people left behind who loved Campbell. They do not know his fate beyond what they infer from the bloody saddle—nor do we, because the speaker does not tell us. However, the speaker does describe the effects of the loss upon Campbell's mother and wife, even quoting the wife's lamentation, because Campbell's absence has deprived her of husband and breadwinner. By avoiding entering the poem as an "I," the speaker maintains objectivity and lets the details speak for themselves.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT SPEAKERS MAY BE GAINED FROM OTHER DETAILS IN POEMS. There is a great deal more to learn about poetic speakers. An obvious place to begin is the title. Take, for example, Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," which reveals that the speaker is a young shepherd and that he is passionately in love.

We can also learn from the speaker's diction. In Housman's "Loveiest of Trees" (Chapter 12), the speaker reveals that he is twenty years old, that he doesn't

think his remaining fifty years (assuming a lifetime of seventy years, the biblical life expectancy) will give him enough time to experience and observe life fully, that he enjoys the flowering of spring, that he knows enough about church rituals to claim that the whiteness of cherry blossoms coincides with the liturgical color of white for Easter, and that he is meditative and somber rather than extroverted and hilarious. All this is quite a bit of information from so short a poem.

If we look at all poems with the same care, we will discover many other details. Grammatical forms and word levels may define the speaker's social class or educational level. Similarly, the selection of topics may indicate the speaker's emotional state, self-esteem, knowledge, attitudes, habits, hobbies, and much more.

The Person with Whom or to Whom the Speaker Is Talking Is the Listener

The second type of character in poetry is the **listener**—an imagined person, not the reader, whom the speaker addresses directly and who is therefore "inside" the poem. Occasionally we find poems in the form of a **dialogue** between two persons, so that the characters are *both* speakers and listeners, as in Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham" (Chapter 18). Whatever the form, the speaker-listener relationship creates drama and tension. In effect, we as readers are an audience, hearing either conversational exchanges or one-way conversations. The speakers of course identify themselves with the "I" pronoun and address their listeners with the pronouns "thou-thy-thee" and "you-your-yours."

In some poems the listener is passive, merely hearing the speaker's words without response, as in Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and Glück's "Snowdrops." In a variation of this situation the listener may not be present, but may instead be the speaker's intended recipient. In this case the speaker is like a letter writer and the listener is the "addressee." Such a listener is the "thou-thine" of Ben Jonson's well-known "Drink to Me, Only, with Thine Eyes."

BEN JONSON (1572–1637)

For a portrait, see Chapter 11, page 658. The following two poems are by Ben Jonson.

Drink to Me, Only, with Thine Eyes (1616)

Drink to me, only, with thine eyes,
And I will pledge° with mine;
Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
And I'll not look for wine.
The thirst that from the soul doth° rise
Doth ask a drink divine:
But might I of Jove's nectar° sup
I would not change° for thine.

drink a toast

does

exchange it [i.e., nectar]

¹ *Pledge*: nectar, Jove, or Jupiter, was the principal Roman god. Nectar (a word meaning "overcoming death") was the drink of the gods; a human being who drank it would become immortal.

I sent thee, late,° a rosy wreath,
 Not so much honoring thee,
 As giving it a hope, that there
 It could not withered be.
 But thou thereon did'st only breathe,
 And sent'st it back to me:
 Since when° it grows, and smells, I swear,
 Not of itself, but thee.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker? What do you learn about him, his knowledge, his wit, and his concern for the listener?
2. What has the speaker sent to the listener? What did she do, and why is he still writing to her?
3. How can the poem be seen as an attempt to “top” the listener’s disdain? Explain why the speaker seems just as interested in showing his wittiness as in complimenting the listener.

This poem demonstrates that the listener has not been passive; she has returned the speaker’s gift and thus has spurned him. Therefore the poem may be seen at least partly as the speaker’s attempt, by demonstrating his wit, to ingratiate himself with the listener. In similar poems involving a speaker and a silent listener, we should consider both the dramatic situation and the listener’s stated and implied responses.

A related but distinct type of situation involving a listener is the **dramatic monologue**, in which the speaker talks directly to an on-the-spot listener whose reactions may directly affect the course of the poem. Browning’s “My Last Duchess” (this chapter) is such a poem, in which the speaker, the duke, addresses an envoy of a “count,” a “you” listener, who has been given the task of arranging financial terms about the dowry to be given by the count when the duke marries the count’s daughter.

Ultimately, we as readers are the listeners of all poems. In this capacity we are the poet’s uninvolved, outside audience. Thus, in poems like Hardy’s “The Work-box” (Chapter 16) and Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” we are a virtual hearing and viewing audience; and in a poem like Housman’s “Loveliest of Trees” (Chapter 12), we are outside listeners, eavesdropping as the speaker meditates on time, death, and beauty. Sometimes, however, the poet may address us directly in our role as readers, as in this brief dedicatory poem that Ben Jonson uses to begin his book of epigrams published in 1616.

To the Reader (1616)

Pray thee, take care, that tak'st my book in hand,
 To read it well: that is, to understand.

In these two brief lines, Jonson establishes intimacy with us as readers by using the second-person singular pronoun *thee*. Although we are clearly outside the poem, Jonson invites us inside by asking us to read well and understand all his forthcoming poems. As much as a poet can, he therefore closes the distance that exists between poet and poem, on the one hand, and reader, on the other.

Only rarely do poets address us directly, as Jonson does. For this reason it is important to determine what is meant when a poet uses the “you” pronoun (see also Chapter 2). Sometimes the “you” suggests that we are on-the-spot listeners and even colleagues or chums of poetic speakers; but more often the “you” is a conversational way by which the speaker refers to himself or herself. Hardy’s speaker in “The Man He Killed” (Chapter 11), for example, uses an indirect “you” in this way, and thereby he establishes our assent to the idea that war is “quaint and curious.” Even when we are invited to become inside-listeners in this way, however, our responses do not enter the poem structurally, and therefore our role as spectators or witnesses does not change. We remain an audience of outside listeners.

Poems Are Sometimes Little Dramas with Major and Minor Participants

Because many poems are dramatic, they often involve a third type of character—major or minor participants. We learn about these characters from appearance, speech, action, and reaction. In the anonymous “Sir Patrick Spens” (Chapter 11), for example, we learn from Sir Patrick’s outcry that he is distressed, but from his action that he is an obedient sea captain. In Hardy’s “Channel Firing” (Chapter 14), we learn that the ages-old skeletons are sorry that they sacrificed personal enjoyment when they were alive, because their strict living did nothing to improve humankind.

Most poetic speakers are reliable reporters about the actions and characters of the major and minor participants. For example, the speaker-narrator of the anonymous “Sir Patrick Spens” is honest and straightforward, and his assessment of Sir Patrick is reliable. But we should also be aware that poetic speakers, as in all fiction, may have interests beyond those of reportorial accuracy. A speaker who uses language for distortion and intimidation is the duke in Browning’s “My Last Duchess.” His words make clear that he is a tyrant and a liar and that we must look beyond his distortions to learn the character of the duchess and the nature of their life together.

Not all participants, of course, are human. Poets frequently include descriptions of the animal and vegetable kingdom, such as swimmers (game fish, people [sometimes]), flyers (orioles, bluejays, swans, ravens, nightingales, larks), walkers and runners (bears, deer, horses, lambs, lions, woodchucks, tigers), and growers (petunias, roses, leaves, birch trees). Although some of these animals and vegetables are often given character traits, as with the horse in Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (Chapter 11), they are more often restricted to roles that are mainly pictorial or symbolic.

Setting and Character in Poetry

The people in poetry do not exist in a vacuum. When they speak and act, they reflect the time, place, thought, social conventions, and general circumstances of their lives. Love poetry, for example, is often mainly about desire, but it is also concerned with the ranges of emotion and responsibility that human beings experience through

culture and environment. Religion, economic circumstances, leisure, chance, and the condition of the natural world may all enter into a lover's pronouncements. Thus, the speaker of Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" daydreams about spending time in open nature with his love, sharing the songs of birds and the sights of "valleys, groves, hills, and fields." Here the setting of an Arcadian dream world—without work, want, or illness—reinforces his desire. Comparably, in Lise! Mueller's "Alive Together," we see another loving character reflecting on a more complex and tenuous world of chance, historical accident, and unpredictable opportunity.

LISE! MUELLER (b. 1924)



Alive Together (1976)

5 Speaking of marvels, I am alive
 together with you, when I might have been
 alive with anyone under the sun,
 when I might have been Abé!ard's woman⁴
 or the whore of a Renaissance pope
 or a peasant wife with not enough food
 and not enough love, with my children
 dead of the plague. I might have slept
 10 in an alcove next to the man
 with the golden nose,⁵ who poked it
 into the business of stars,
 or sewn a starry flag⁶
 for a general with wooden teeth.
 I might have been the exemplary Pocahontas⁷
 Or a woman without a name
 15 Weeping in Master's bed
 for my husband, exchanged for a mule,
 my daughter, lost in a drunken bet.
 I might have been stretched on a totem pole
 20 to appease a vindictive god
 or left, a useless girl-child,
 to die on a cliff. I like to think
 I might have been Mary Shelley⁸
 in love with a wrongheaded angel,
 or Mary's friend. I might have been you.
 25 This poem is endless, the odds against us are endless,
 our chances of being alive together
 statistically nonexistent;

⁴ Abé!ard's woman: Peter Abé!ard (1079–1142), a famous teacher at the University of Paris, fell in love with his student, Eloise (1101–1162). They married, but their relationship was forcibly ended by Eloise's uncle; nevertheless, their passion and frustrated love have become legendary. ⁵ 10: man with the golden nose: Tycho Brahe (1546–1601), the brilliant and methodical Swedish astronomer, lost the bridge of his nose in a duel, and afterwards always wore a metallic prosthesis. ⁶ 12: sewn a starry flag: Betsy Ross (1752–1836) created the first American flag in 1776 after visiting George Washington (1732–1797), who had to use wooden false teeth for most of his adult life. ⁷ Pocahontas: Pocahontas (c. 1595–1617), an American Indian princess, was famous as a friend of John Smith of the Jamestown plantation in Virginia. Eventually she converted to Christianity and married John Rolfe (c. 1585–1622). ⁸ Mary Shelley: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797–1851), the author of *Frankenstein* (1818), was the second wife of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), who was known for his radical views.

still we have made it, alive in a time
 when rationalists in square hats⁹
 and hatless Jehovah's Witnesses⁹
 agree, it is almost over,
 alive with our lively children
 who—but for endless ifs—
 might have missed out on being alive
 together with marvels and follies
 and longings and lies and wishes
 and error and humor and mercy
 and journeys and voices and faces
 and colors and summers and mornings
 and knowledge and tears and chance.

⁹ 30: rationalists in square hats: a reference to the poem "Six Significant Landscapes" by Wallace Stevens (1879–1955), in which the idea is that most thinkers are limited by their inability to comprehend truths that might lie beyond the close confines of their observations. The relevant passage is in Stanza 6: "Rationalists, wearing square hats, / Think, in square rooms, / Looking at the floor, / Looking at the ceiling." ³¹ Jehovah's Witnesses: a large religious denomination, founded in 1931, whose members believe that human civilization will be destroyed during a universal war—the Battle of Armageddon. Then, surviving true believers will live a life of peace and harmony.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the speaker. What assumptions does she make about her immediate listener? What does the poet, Mueller, assume about the knowledge of her readers?
2. What is the nature of life and existence, as the speaker expresses it in lines 37 through 41?
3. Why does Mueller use the phrase "might have . . ." as often as she does in the poem?

This richly allusive poem shows the interaction of character and the vagaries of human history. Mueller's speaker, in contemplating the "marvels" of her life, considers how slight are the chances that she and her husband could ever have lived during the same period of time, could ever have met under favorable circumstances, and then could ever have been able to create and live a long, rich, eventful, intimate, and satisfying married life together.

As a general principle, settings in poetry readily bring out the ideas of characters who create and express personal, political, philosophical, and religious thoughts. Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" shows how important such thought can be when it is integrated into poetry. Here the approaching "darkness" causes the speaker to think of the "rude forefathers of the hamlet" in their churchyard graves. This thought leads him to speculate about how death cuts off those who are talented and potentially great. The interaction here is complex, interweaving character and history with natural and cultural situations and images. A poem similarly connecting character and setting is Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" (this chapter). This poem, based on the relationship of the past, present, and future of the speaker to the natural scenes he describes, is a model of how poetic setting and character can be fused.

It is no exaggeration to say that setting interacts with character in endless numbers of ways. Thus in Browning's "My Last Duchess," the duke's display of valuable art creates a setting that exposes his greed and cruelty. In "London," Blake introduces bleak sights and anguished sounds that evoke a response of

repulsion and rejection. As the representation of a philosophical judgment, the setting of Arnold's "Dover Beach" demonstrates changeability and impermanence. The speaker's solution is to establish personal fidelity as a fixture against change, dissolution, and brutality. To greater or lesser degrees, most poems offer similar connections of setting and character.



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SHERMAN ALEXIE (b. 1966)

For a photo, see Chapter 2, page 128.

On the Amtrak from Boston to New York City

The white woman across the aisle from me says "Look, look at all the history, that house on the hill there is over two hundred years old," as she points out the window past me

into what she has been taught. I have learned little more about American history during my few days back East than what I expected and far less of what we should all know of the tribal stories

whose architecture is 15,000 years older than the corners of the house that sits museumed on the hill. "Walden Pond," the woman on the train asks, "Did you see Walden Pond?"

and I don't have a cruel enough heart to break her own by telling her there are five Walden Ponds on my little reservation out West

and at least a hundred more surrounding Spokane,

the city I pretended to call my home. "Listen," I could have told her. "I don't give a shit

about Walden. I know the Indians were living stories around that pond before Walden's grandparents were born

and before his grandparents' grandparents were born.

I'm tired of hearing about Don-fucking-Henley saving it, too, because that's redundant. If Don Henley's brothers and sisters and mothers and father hadn't come here in the first place

then nothing would need to be saved."

But I didn't say a word to the woman about Walden Pond because she smiled so much and seemed delighted that I thought to bring her an orange juice

back from the food car. I respect elders

of every color. All I really did was eat

my tasteless sandwich, drink my Diet Pepsi

and nod my head whenever the woman pointed out

another little piece of her country's history

while I, as all Indians have done

since this war began, made plans

for what I would do and say the next time

somebody from the enemy thought I was one of their own.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the situation of this poem? What is the speaker doing during the "time" of the poem? What is taking place when the speaker is meditating about what the "white" woman across the aisle has said to him? What is the subject of the conversation with the woman? Why does he bring her an orange juice? What does this show about his character?
2. Why does the speaker denigrate the work of Don Henley (the American singer [b. 1947] and one of the founders in 1990 of the Walden Woods Project)?
3. From what perspective does the speaker make his judgments about the historicity and value of Thoreau's Walden Pond? In terms of historic preservation, what is the speaker's position about the "five Walden Ponds" and the hundred more Walden Ponds back in his home near Spokane (Washington)? Basically, what is the speaker's opinion about the value of "White" history as opposed to the history of his own Indian people, which extends 15,000 years into the past before European settlers came to America?

4. What is this poem about? Why does the speaker refer to his situation as “this war” (line 35)? Why does the speaker consider the woman as “somebody from the enemy”? What does the speaker tell us he could have said, but didn’t? What are the issues underlying the speaker’s meditation about the relative values of Native American history and the history of European settlers in America?
5. Compare the attitudes of Alexie’s speaker in “On the Amtrak” and Tom Whitecloud’s speaker in “Blue Winds Dancing” (Chapter 5). What attitudes do the speakers express? Why? What is happening during the two works that makes the speaker’s internal monologues different?

MATTHEW ARNOLD (1822–1888)

Dover Beach (1867; 1849)

The sea is calm tonight.
 The tide is full, the moon lies fair
 Upon the straits—on the French coast the light
 Glimmers and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
 Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
 Come to the window, sweet is the night air!
 Only, from the long line of spray
 Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
 Listen! you hear the grating roar
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
 At their return, up the high strand,
 Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
 The eternal note of sadness in.

15 Sophocles long ago
 Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
 Of human misery; we
 Find also in the sound a thought,
 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
 Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles^o of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

QUESTIONS

1. What words and details establish the setting?
2. Where are the speaker and listener? What can they see? Hear?
3. What sort of movement may be topographically traced in the first six lines of the poem, so that the scene finally focuses on the speaker and the listener?
4. What is meant by comparing the English Channel to the Aegean Sea, and relating the Aegean surf to the thought of Sophocles?
5. What faith remains after the loss of religious faith? Defend the claim that the faith is the speaker’s commitment to personal fidelity rather than love.

WILLIAM BLAKE (1757–1827)

For a portrait, see Chapter 12, page 682.

London (1794)

I wander thro’ each charter’d^o street,
 Near where the charter’d Thames does flow,
 And mark in every face I meet
 Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
 In every Infants’ cry of fear,
 In every voice, in every ban,^o
 The mind-forg’d manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper’s cry
 Every blackning Church appalls,^o
 And the hapless Soldier’s sigh
 Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro’ midnight streets I hear
 How the youthful Harlot’s curse
 Blasts the new-born Infants’ tear,
 And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

¹ *Charter’d*, privileged, licensed, authorized. ¹⁰ *appalls*: weakens, makes pale, shocks.

QUESTIONS

1. What does London represent to the speaker? How do the persons who live there contribute to the poem’s ideas about the state of humanity?
2. What sounds does the speaker mention as a part of the London scene? Characterize these sounds in relation to the poem’s main idea.
3. Because of the tension in the poem, between civilized activity (as represented in the chartering of the street and the river) and free human impulses, explain how the poem might be considered revolutionary.

4. The poem appeared in *Songs of Experience*, published in 1794. Explain the appropriateness of Blake's including the poem in a collection so named.

ELIZABETH BREWSTER (b. 1922)

Where I Come From (1994)

People are made of places. They carry with them
 hints of jungles or mountains, a tropic grace
 or the cool eyes of sea-gazers. Atmosphere of cities
 how different drops from them, like the smell of smog
 or the almost-not-smell of tulips in the spring,
 nature tidily plotted in little squares
 with a fountain in the centre; museum smell,
 art also tidily plotted with a guidebook;
 or the smell of work, glue factories maybe,
 chromium-plated offices; smell of subways
 crowded at rush hours.

Where I come from, people
 carry woods in their minds, acres of pine woods;
 blueberry patches in the burned-out bush;
 wooden farmhouses, old, in need of paint,
 with yards where hens and chickens circle about,
 clucking aimlessly; battered schoolhouses
 behind which violets grow. Spring and winter
 are the mind's chief seasons: ice and the breaking of ice.

A door in the mind blows open, and there blows
 a frosty wind from fields of snow.

QUESTIONS

1. In what sense are people "made of places" (line 1)? What kinds of places does the poet describe in the first eleven lines?
2. How does the poem shift at the middle of line 11? Does it seem that the speaker presents a more favorable view of the area "Where I come from" than of the area described in the first eleven lines?
3. What is the sense of the final two lines? How are these lines connected to the earlier parts of the poem? What sense of self-criticism is apparent in these last two lines?

ROBERT BROWNING (1812–1889)

My Last Duchess^o (1842)

Ferrara

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
 Looking as if she were alive. I call



^oThe poem "My Last Duchess" is based on incidents in the life of Alfonso II, duke of Ferrara, whose first wife died in 1561. Some claimed she was poisoned. The duke negotiated his second marriage to the daughter of the count of Tyrol through an agent.

That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
 Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
 "Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
 Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
 And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,^o
 How such a glance came there; so, not the first
 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
 Her husband's presence only, called that spot
 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
 Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
 Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
 Must never hope to reproduce the faint
 Half-flush that dies along her throat"; such stuff
 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
 For calling up that spot of joy. She had
 A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
 Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
 Sir, 'twas all one! My favor 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
 Sometimes—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 a 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 lessened 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

^o Frà Pandolf: an imaginary painter who is also a monk.

At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
 Together down, sir. Notice Neptune,^o though,
 Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity,
 Which Claus of Innsbruck^c cast in bronze for me!

^o54 Neptune: Roman god of the sea. ^c56 Claus of Innsbruck: an imaginary sculptor.

QUESTIONS

1. Who dominates the conversation in this poem? Who is the listener? What is the purpose of the "conversation"? Why does the speaker avoid dealing with the purpose until near the poem's end?
2. What third character does the speaker describe? In what ways are his descriptions accurate or inaccurate? What judgment do you think Browning wants you to make of the speaker? Why?
3. How does the speaker's language illustrate his attitude toward his own power? In light of this attitude, what do you think Browning's point is in the poem?

WILLIAM COWPER (1731–1800)

The Poplar Field (1782)

The poplars are felled,^o farewell to the shade
 And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade.
 The winds play no longer, and sing in the leaves,
 Nor Ouse^o on his bosom their image receives.

5 Twelve years have elapsed since I last took a view
 Of my favourite field and the bank where they grew,
 And now in the grass behold they are laid,
 And the tree is my seat that once lent me a shade.

10 The blackbird has fled to another retreat
 Where the hazels afford him a screen from the heat,
 And the scene where his melody charmed me before,
 Resounds with his sweet-flowing ditty no more.

15 My fugitive years are all hastening away,
 And I must ere long lie as lowly as they,
 With a turf on my breast, and a stone at my head,
 Ere another such grove shall arise in its stead.

'Tis a sight to engage me, if any thing can,
 To muse on the perishing pleasures of man;
 Though his life be a dream, his enjoyments, I see,
 Have a being less durable even than he.

^o4 Ouse: river in northern England, near which Cowper lived.

QUESTIONS

1. What situation does the speaker describe? How has the scene changed from what he knew twelve years before? Why does the speaker refer to the passage of time? What kind of person is he?
2. How has the situation affected the blackbird? Why does the speaker care?
3. How does the scene affect the speaker? What idea does he express about what has occurred?

ALLEN GINSBERG (1926–1997)

A Further Proposal (1947)

Come live with me and be my love,
 And we will some old pleasures prove.
 Men like me have paid in verse
 This costly courtesy, or curse;

But I would bargain with my art
 (As to the mind, now to the heart),
 My symbols, images, and signs
 Please me more outside these lines.

For you share and recompense,
 You will be taught another sense:
 The wisdom of the subtle worm
 Will turn most perfect in your form.

Not that your soul need tutored be
 By intellectual decree,
 But graces that the mind can share
 Will make you, as more wise, more fair,

Till all the world's devoted thought
 Find all in you it ever sought,
 And even I, of skeptic mind,
 A Resurrection of a kind.

This compliment, in my own way,
 For what I would receive, I pay;
 Thus all the wise have writ thereof,
 And all the fair have been their love.

QUESTIONS

1. How is this poem integrated with the other comparable poems in this chapter (by Marlowe, Lewis, Raleigh)? In what ways is this poem more "realistic" than the others? In what ways might this poem be considered cynical? How may it be read as a criticism of the other poems?
3. What does the speaker mean by saying that he is pleased more "outside these signs" (line 8)? What does he mean by "For what I would receive, I pay" (line 22)?



5

10

15

20

LOUISE GLÜCK (b. 1943)**Snowdrops** (1992)

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know
what despair is; then
winter should have meaning for you.

I did not expect to survive,
earth suppressing me. I didn't expect
to waken again, to feel
in damp earth my body
able to respond again, remembering
after so long how to open again
in the cold light
of earliest spring—

afraid, yes, but among you again
crying yes risk joy

in the raw wind of the new world.

QUESTIONS

1. How much does the speaker say about her previous condition? What does she say about how she has changed? What do you conclude has happened to make her change?
2. Why is the poem titled "Snowdrops"? What are snowdrops? How are the descriptions of those that actual snowdrops might articulate, if they could actually speak?
3. What is the meaning of the phrase "yes risk joy" in line 13, even though the "new world" is filled with "raw wind"?
4. Compare this poem with Dickinson's "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed" (Chapter 21).

THOMAS GRAY (1716–1771)**Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard** (1751)

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as wand'ring near her secret bower
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mold'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell forever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care;
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe^o has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If men'y o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honor's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of death?

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear;

15

hunting horn

20

25

church land

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55 Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village Hampden,⁵⁷ that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

60 Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes.

65 Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

70 The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,
Or heap the shrine of luxury and pride
With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

Far from the madding⁵⁸ crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
Along the cool sequestered vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

75 Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth⁵⁹ rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

80 Their names; their years, spelt by th' unlettered Muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply;
And many a holy text around she strews,
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

85 For who to dumb forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?

90 On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

For thee, who mindful of th' unhonored dead
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;

⁵⁷ *Hampden*: John Hampden (1594–1643), English statesman who defended the rights of the people against King Charles I and who died in the English Civil War of 1642–1646.

If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate.

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
"Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
Brushing with hasty steps the dew away
To meet the sun upon the upland lawn."

"There, at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic⁶⁰ roots so high,
His listless length at noontide would he stretch
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

"Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Mut'ring his wayward fancies he would rove,
Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
Or crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless love.

"One morn I missed him on the 'customed hill,
Along the heath and near his fav'rite tree;
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

"The next with dinges due in sad array
Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,
Graved on the stone beneath you aged thorn."

THE EPIGRAP

Here rests his head upon the lap of earth
A youth to fortune and to fame unknown;
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy marked him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heav'n did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to mis'ry all he had, a tear:
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wished) a friend.

No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode
(There they alike in trembling hope repose),
The bosom of his Father and his God.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the time of day of the speaker's meditation? What is happening in nature as the poem opens? Whom is the speaker addressing?
2. Who are the people buried in the church graveyard? What point does Gray make about the contributions they might have made if they had not died?
3. How does Gray's use of sights and sounds complement the poem's mood?
4. Who is "thee" (line 93)? What happens to him? Why is he included in the poem?

⁶⁰ *fancifully extravagant, grotesque*

⁵⁹ *uneducated, unsophisticated*

THOMAS HARDY (1840–1928)

For a photo, see Chapter 11, page 656.

The Ruined Maid (1866)

“O ‘melia,⁹ my dear, this does everything crown!⁹
Who could have supposed I should meet you in Town?
And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty”—
“O didn’t you know I’d been ruined,” said she.

5 —“You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,
Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks;⁹
And now you’ve gay bracelets and bright feathers three!”
“Yes: that’s how we dress when we’re ruined,” said she.

10 —“At home in the barton⁹ you said ‘thee’ and ‘thou,’
And ‘thik oon,’ and ‘theas oon,’ and ‘t’other,’⁹ but now
Your talking quite fits ‘ee’ for high compa-ny!”—
“Some polish is gained with one’s ruin,” said she.

15 —“Your hands were like paws then, your face blue and bleak
But now I’m bewitched by your delicate cheek,
And your little gloves fit as on any la-dy!”—
“We never do work when we’re ruined,” said she.

20 —“You used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream,
And you’d sigh, and you’d sock,⁹ but at present you seem
To know not of megrims⁹ or melancho-ly!”—
“True. One’s pretty lively when ruined,” said she.

—“I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,
And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!”—
“My dear—a raw country girl, such as you be,
Cannot quite expect that. You ain’t ruined,” said she.

⁹ I does everything crown: crowns everything; is a great surprise. ⁹ At home in the barton: when you lived at home on the farm. ⁹–¹⁰ ‘thee’ . . . ‘t’other’: i.e., you spoke familiarly in the country dialect (using the second-person pronoun), saying “thik oon” for “that one” and “theas oon” for “this one.”

QUESTIONS

1. Who are the two speakers? How have they come together? What are their present economic circumstances? Who is ‘melia (Amelia)? Does she seem to be bragging to the first speaker? Why hasn’t the first speaker learned about ‘melia earlier, before their encounter in town?
2. How aware of her situation is ‘melia? Is she happy or unhappy about it? How completely has she shed her country habits of speech?
3. What double meaning does the word “ruined” have in this poem? To what extent does Hardy use the poem to challenge conventional moral judgments?

GARRETT HONGO (b. 1951)**The Legend (1988)**
In memory of Jay Kashiwamura

In Chicago, it is snowing softly
and a man has just done his wash for the week.
He steps into the twilight of early evening,
carrying a wrinkled shopping bag
full of neatly folded clothes,

and, for a moment, enjoys
the feel of warm laundry and crinkled paper,
flannel-like against his gloveless hands.

There’s a Rembrandt glow on his face,
a triangle of orange in the hollow of his cheek
as a last flash of sunset
blazes the storefronts and lit windows of the street.

He is Asian, Thai or Vietnamese,
and very skinny, dressed as one of the poor
in rumpled suit pants and a plaid mackinaw,
dingy and too large.

He negotiates the slick of ice
on the sidewalk by his car,
opens the Fairlane’s back door,
leans to place the laundry in,
and turns, for an instant,
toward the flurry of footsteps
and cries of pedestrians

as a boy—that’s all he was—
backs from the corner package store
shooting a pistol, firing it,
once, at the dumbfounded man
who falls forward,
grabbing at his chest.

A few sounds escape from his mouth,
a babbling no one understands
as people surround him
bewildered at his speech.

The noises he makes are nothing to them.
The boy has gone, lost
in the light array of foot traffic
dipping the snow with fresh prints.

Tonight, I read about Descartes’
grand courage to doubt everything
except his own miraculous existence
and I feel so distinct
from the wounded man lying on the concrete
I am ashamed

Let the night sky cover him as he dies.
Let the weaver girl⁹ cross the bridge of heaven
and take up his cold hands.

⁹*the weaver girl*: an ancient Chinese and also Japanese legend, comparable to Valentine's Day, about the Weaver Girl (the star Vega) and her sweetheart, the Cowherd (the star Altair), who are separated in the night skies but reunited once yearly when they are permitted to cross the Milky Way on a bridge formed by many magpies.

QUESTIONS

- Describe and characterize the scene in which the action of this poem takes place. What, if anything, is special about the scene? Who are the major characters? What action takes place between them?
- What is the relationship between the scene and the action? Why does the poet concentrate on the man who has come out of the laundry, and not on the boy who has come out of the package store?
- Who is the speaker of this poem? What are his reactions to the shooting? In his contemplation, why does he think of René Descartes (1596–1650) and the nature of existence (line 38)? Why do you think he says that he feels “ashamed” (line 43)?

DORIANNE LAUX (b. 1952)



The Life of Trees (2003)

The pines rub their great noise
into the spangled dark.
They scratch their itchy boughs
Against the house and the mystery
of that mean translates
into drudgery of ownership: time
to drag the ladder from the shed,
climb onto the roof with a saw
between my teeth, cut those suckers down.
What's reality if not a long exhaustive
cringe from the blade,
the teeth. I want to sleep
and dream the life of trees, beings
from the muted world who care nothing
for Money, Politics, Power,
Will or Right, who want little from the night
but a few dead stars going dim, a white owl
lifting from their limbs, who want only
to sink their roots into the wet ground
and terrify the worms or shake
their bleary heads like fashion models
or old hippies. If they could speak,
they wouldn't, only hum some low
green note, roll their pinecones
down the empty streets and blame it,
with a shrug, on the cold wind.
During the day they sleep inside
their furry bark, clouds shredding

like ancient lace above their crowns.
Sun. Rain. Snow. Wind. They fear
Nothing but the Hurricane, and Fire,
that whipped bully who rises up
and becomes his own dead father.
Then the young ones bend and bend
and the old know they may not make it,
go down with the power lines sparking,
broken at the trunk. They fling
their branches, forked sacrifice
to the beaten earth. They do not pray.
If they make a sound it's eaten
by the wind. And though the stars
return they do not offer thanks,
only ooze a sticky sap from their roundish
concentric wounds, clap the water
from their needles, straighten their spines
and breathe, and breathe again.

QUESTIONS

- What contrast does the poem develop between human and sylvan or arboreal life? In general terms, what kind of existence do trees represent? How accurately does the poem describe this existence?
- In what way does the speaker seem to idealize the cares and interests of trees, in contrast to the tasks and duties of human beings? How does the final line, “breathe, and breathe again,” represent a goal or duty from which human beings may benefit?
- Why does the speaker say “What's reality if not a long exhaustive / cringe from the blade, / the teeth”? How does this description fit an idea of the reality facing human beings?

C. DAY LEWIS (1904–1972)

Song (1935)

Come, live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
Of peace and plenty, bed and board,
That chance employment may afford.
I'll handle dainties on the docks
And thou shalt read of summer frocks:
At evening by the sour canals
We'll hope to hear some madrigals.
Care on thy maiden brow shall put
A wreath of wrinkles, and thy foot
Beset with pain: not silken dress
But toil shall tire thy loveliness.
Hunger shall make thy modest zone
And cheat fond death of all but bone—
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the connection and contrast between this poem and Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd to His Love"?
2. To what other poems in this chapter is this poem related? How?
3. Who is the speaker in this poem? The listener?
4. What is the effect of words like "chance employment" (line 4), "read" (line 6); and "hope" (line 8)?

ROBERT LOWELL (1917–1977)**Memories of West Street^o and Lepke (1959)**

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
 in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
 I hog a whole house on Boston's
 "hardly passionate Marlborough Street,"^o
 where even the man
 scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
 has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,
 and is "a young Republican."
 I have a nine months' daughter,
 young enough to be my granddaughter.
 Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants' wear.

These are the tranquilized *Fifties*,
 and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?
 I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
 and made my manic statement,
 telling off the state and president, and then
 sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
 beside a negro boy with curlicues
 of marijuana in his hair.

20 Given a year,
 I walked on the roof of the West Street Jail, a short
 enclosure like my school soccer court,
 and saw the Hudson River once a day
 through sooty clothesline entanglements
 and bleaching khaki tenements.
 25 Strolling, I yammered metaphysics with Abramowitz,^o
 a jaundice-yellow ("it's really tan")
 and fly-weight pacifist,
 so vegetarian,
 he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit.
 He tried to convert Bioff and Brown,

^oThe West Street Jail in lower Manhattan, where Lowell spent ten days in 1943 before being sent to a federal prison to serve a year's sentence as a conscientious objector (C.O.) for refusing to serve in the armed services during World War II (1941–1945). ^oMarlborough Street: in Boston, where Lowell had a house in the late 1950s, when he was writing this poem. ^oAbramowitz, Bioff and Brown: These men were also prisoners at the West Street Jail.

the Hollywood pimps, to his diet.
 Hairy, muscular, suburban,
 wearing chocolate double-breasted suits,
 they blew their tops and beat him black and blue.

I was so out of things, I'd never heard
 of the Jehovah's Witnesses.
 "Are you a C.O.?" I asked a fellow jailbird.
 "No," he answered, "I'm a J.W."
 He taught me the "hospital tuck,"
 and pointed out the T-shirted back
 of *Murder Incorporated's* Czar Lepke,^o
 there piling towels on a rack,
 or dawdling off to his little segregated cell full
 of things forbidden to the common man:
 a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American
 flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm.
 Flabby, bald, lobotomized,
 he drifted in a sheepish calm,
 where no agonizing reappraisal
 jarred his concentration on the electric chair
 hanging like an oasis in his air
 of lost connections. . . .

^oCzar Lepke: Louis "Lepke" Buchalter (1897–1944), a notorious professional criminal, was convicted of two murders (though he had been connected with as many as a hundred); he was executed in 1944. A reported conversation between Lepke and Lowell took place. Lepke stated that he was in prison for killing, and Lowell responded that he was in prison for refusing to kill.

QUESTIONS

1. Why is the poem titled "Memories of West Street and Lepke"? What observations does the speaker make about his experiences at the West-Street Prison?
2. Why does the speaker open the poem by noting his present residence on Marlborough Street in Boston? How does he characterize this neighborhood? How is it contrasted with the West-Street Prison?
3. What conclusions do you think you are expected to draw from "Memories of West Street and Lepke"?

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (1564–1593)**The Passionate Shepherd to His Love (1599)**

Come live with me and be my love,
 And we will all the pleasures prove^o
 That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
 Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the rocks,
 Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,

test, try out

By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

10 And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle^o
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;

15 A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

20 A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs;
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

The shepherds' swains^o shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May morning;
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the speaker. What does he do? What is he like? What does he want?
2. Who is the listener? What is the relationship between speaker and listener?
3. What sort of life does the speaker offer the listener?
4. What is the speaker's understanding of reality?

JOYCE CAROL OATES (b. 1938)

For a photo, see Chapter 5, page 303.

Loving (1970)

A balloon of gauze around us,
sheerest gauze: it is a balloon of skin
around us, fine light-riddled skin,
invisible.

5 If we reach out to pinch its walls it floats from us—
it eludes us wetly, this sac.

It is warmed by a network of veins
fine as hairs and invisible.
The veins pulsate and expand to the width
of eyelashes.

10

In them blood floats weightless as color.
The warm walls sink upon us when we love
each other, and are blinded by the heavier skin
that closes over our eyes.

We are in here together.
Outside, people are walking in a landscape—
it is a city landscape, it is theirs.
Their shouts and laughter come to us in broken sounds.
Their strides take them everywhere in daylight.
If they turn suddenly toward us we draw back—
the skin shudders wetly, finely—
will we be torn into two people?

The balloon will grow up around us again
as if breathed out of us, moist and sticky and light
as skin, more perfect than our own skin,
invisible.

QUESTIONS

1. What does the speaker mean by a "balloon of gauze around us" (line 1)? How does she define this balloon? What does she mean by "We are in here together" (line 15)?
2. Why does the speaker refer to veins and blood and "warm walls" (line 12) in discussing the subject of loving? How common are these references to love? How appropriate is the language?
3. How would you characterize the speaker's attitudes about love? To what does the final stanza refer?

SIR WALTER RALEGH (1552–1618)

The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd (1600)

If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move
To live with thee and be thy love.

Time drives the flocks from field to fold^o
When rivers rage and rocks grow cold,
And Philomel^o becomes dumb;
The rest complains of cares to come.

The flowers do fade, and wanton fields
To wayward winter reckoning yields;
A honey-tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall.



fenced field

the nightingale

10

15 Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of roses,
Thy cap, thy kirtle,^o and thy posties^o
Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten—
In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

20 Thy belt of straw and ivy buds,
Thy coral clasps and amber studs,
All these in me no means can move
To come to thee and be thy love.

But could youth last and love still^o breed,
Had joys no date nor age no need,
Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee and be thy love.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker? What do we learn about the speaker? Who is the listener?
2. How are the ideas of love and the world in this poem different from those in Marlowe's poem?
3. To what extent is this poem a parody (an imitation that makes fun) of Marlowe's poem? To what extent is it a refutation of Marlowe's poem?
4. Determine the steps of the speaker's logical argument in this poem.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI (1830–1894)

A Christmas Carol (1872)

In the bleak mid-winter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter
Long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him
Nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When He comes to reign:
In the bleak mid-winter
A stable-place sufficed^o
The Lord God Almighty
Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him whom cherubim
Worship night and day,

long dress; flowers and posties

A breastful of milk
And a mangerful of hay;
Enough for Him whom angels
Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.

Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
Throng'd the air,
But only His mother
In her maiden bliss
Worshipp'd the Beloved
With a kiss.

What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd^o
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man^o
I would do my part,—
Yet what I can I give Him,
Give my heart.

QUESTIONS

1. Why does Rossetti stress the bitterness and bleakness of the winter setting in this poem?
2. Why does the speaker stress the simplicity of the birthplace of "The Lord God Almighty"? What is the origin and tradition of this setting?
3. How does the fourth stanza prepare you for the speaker's description of her own condition in the fifth stanza?
4. How are the objects considered gifts by the speaker a part of the setting traditionally associated with the birth of Jesus? How does the speaker's gift reveal her character and condition?

JANE SHORE (b. 1947)

A Letter Sent to Summer (1977)

Oh summer if you would only come
with your big baskets of flowers,
dropping by like an old friend
just passing through the neighborhood!

If you came to my door disguised
as a thirsty biblical angel
I'd buy all your hairbrushes and magazines!

20

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35

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See *Luke 2:8–20*See *Matthew 2:1–12*See *Luke 2*

5

I'd be more hospitable
than any ancient king.

10 I'd personally carry your luggage in,
Your monsoons. Your squadrons of bugs,
Your plums and lovely melons.
Let the rose let out its long long sigh
And Desire return to the hapless rabbit.

15 This request is also in my own behalf.
Inside my head it is always snowing,
even when I sleep. When I wake up,
and still you have not arrived,
I curl back into my blizzard of linens.

20 Not like winter's buckets of whitewash.
Please wallpaper my bedroom
with leafy vegetables and farms.
If you knocked right now,
I would not interfere.
25 Start near the window.
Start right here.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the speaker. What do you learn about her and how she is responding to the time of year?
2. Describe what summer means to the speaker. What attributes does she give to summer? What contrasts are brought out by references to "bugs" and "monsoons" in addition to "plums" and "the rose"?
3. What does the phrase "always snowing" contribute to your understanding of the speaker's yearning for summer?

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770–1850)

For a portrait, see Chapter 12, page 700.

Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, June 13, 1798 (1798)

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs

⁹Wordsworth first visited the valley of the Wye in southwest England in August 1793, at age twenty-nine. On this second visit he was accompanied by his sister Dorothy (the "Friend" in line 115).

5 With a soft inland murmur.—Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion, and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose

10 Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
15 These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

20 These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
25 With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
35 In which the burden of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
40 Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

If this
Be but a vain belief, yet, oh!—how oft—
In darkness and amid the many shapes

55 Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!
And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
60 And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
The picture of the mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
65 For future years. And so I dare to hope,
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first
I came among these hills; when like a roe
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
70 Wherever nature led: more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
And their glad animal movements all gone by)
75 To me was all in all.—I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours, and their forms, were then to me
80 An appetite; a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.—That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
85 And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense. For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
90 Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
95 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
100 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still

A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.
Nor perchance,
110 If I were not thus taught, should I the more
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:
For thou art with me here upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
120 May I behold in thee what I was once,
My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make,
Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
125 With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we behold
Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
135 And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and, in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
140 Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance—
If I should be where I no more can hear
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams
Of past existence—wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together; and that I, so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came

Unwearied in that service: rather say
 With warmer love—oh! with far deeper zeal
 Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,
 That after many wanderings, many years
 Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
 And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
 More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!

155

QUESTIONS

1. What is the opening scene, and what meaning does the poet ascribe to it?
2. To the speaker, what is the relationship of remembered scenes and the growth of moral behavior?
3. What effect does the speaker believe the present will have on his future?
4. In lines 93–111, how successfully does the speaker make concrete his ideas about moral forces?
5. What is the power that the speaker attributes to nature? What is the “cheerful faith” of lines 133–134?

JAMES WRIGHT (1927–1980)



A Blessing (1963)

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
 Twilight sounds softly forth on the grass.
 And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
 Darken with kindness.

They have come gladly out of the willows
 To welcome my friend and me.
 We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
 Where they have been grazing all day, alone.

They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
 That we have come.

They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
 There is no loneliness like theirs.

At home once more,
 They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
 I would like to hold the slender one in my arms.

For she has walked over to me
 And nuzzled my left hand.

She is black and white,

Her mane falls wild on her forehead,

And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear

That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.

Suddenly I realize

That if I stepped out of my body I would break

Into blossom.

5

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QUESTIONS

1. What has happened just before the poem opens? Account for the poet's use of the present tense in his descriptions.
2. Is the setting specific or general? What happens as the poem progresses?
3. What realization overtakes the speaker? How does this realization constitute a “blessing,” and what does it show about his character?
4. Why is it necessary for the poet to include all the detail of the first twenty-one lines before the realization of the last three?

WRITING ABOUT CHARACTER AND SETTING IN POETRY

Writing about character and setting involves many of the same considerations whether you deal with prose fiction or poetry. You might therefore review the material on character presented in Chapter 3. However, there are some important differences between the two writing tasks. One of these is the way you find out about characters. In prose fiction, you can usually judge a character by the details about his or her actions, words, thoughts, appearance, and opinions. In poetry, the speaker is less likely to provide full details. Consequently, many conclusions must be inferred from the speaker's suggestions and hints.

Another difference between fiction and poetry concerns the types of character. Fiction presents a broad range of writing options: You may write about the protagonist, the antagonist, the narrator, or any of the incidental characters. In poetry you are usually limited to the speaker or to one of the characters described by the speaker (although you may sometimes be able to discuss the listener, too). In writing about Browning's “My Last Duchess,” for example, you learn enough about both the duke and the duchess to write about either.

In planning and prewriting, you should determine as much as you can about the characters and their relationship to their situations—that is, to the action, emotion, ideas, setting, and other characters. Answering the following questions will help you to focus your ideas.

Questions for Discovering Ideas

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

- Who is the speaker? What is he or she doing? What does he or she say about himself or herself? About others?
- What conclusions can you draw about occurrences involving the speaker that took place before the poem begins?
- How reliable is the speaker as an observer and reporter? What knowledge enables the speaker to make judgments and opinions?
- What do the speaker's word choices reveal about his or her education and social standing? How does the language reveal his or her assumptions?
- What tone of voice is suggested in the speaker's presentation?

- How deeply is the speaker involved with the action of the poem? What connection does she or he make with the other characters? With the poem's actions?

ABOUT OTHER CHARACTERS

- How vividly does the poem describe action, appearance, emotions, responses, and ideas? How strong a picture do you get of any other character (characters)?
- How does each significant character respond to the surroundings described and implied in the poem?
- What is the character trying to gain or learn?
- How is the character affected by others, and how do others respond to her or to him?
- What degree of control does the character exert, and what does his or her effort tell you?
- How does the character speak and behave, and what do you learn from these words and actions?

Strategies for Organizing Ideas

When you write about a single character, formulate a central idea that focuses on his or her personality or status. If you are writing about the duke in Browning's "My Last Duchess," for example, your idea might be that he is arrogant, cruel, greedy, and power-mad. In writing about Sir Patrick Spens (Chapter 11), your idea would likely be about his self-sacrificing fidelity to the king. If the topic is a set of characters, the central idea should express a relationship or commonality among them. Thus the speaker of Lowell's "Memories of West Street and Lepke" suggests that his own presence in the "tranquilized Fifties" is not dissimilar to the "sheepish calm" of Lepke as he remembers him; and the characters described in Blake's "London" illustrate the withering effects of discriminatory law and religion.

Consider organizing your essay along the lines of one of the following approaches:

1. *Character as revealed by action.* Often the speaker describes himself or herself as a major character or major mover. What does the action reveal about this speaker? In Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," the speaker enters the churchyard at sunset, and his action causes him to think of life, glory, fame, fortune, and religious dedication. What do his speculations and conclusions reveal about his character? In Shore's "A Letter Sent to Summer," the speaker indicates that she would be willing to buy "hairbrushes and magazines" from Summer. What does this proposed action demonstrate?

In a parallel way, the speaker of Glück's "Snowdrops" is a newly animated early spring flower, the snowdrop, that has undergone a rebirth of life following the seeming death by burial in the earth during winter's cold. In addition, if we read the poem as a representation of human life, we may accept the speaker as a person describing recovery and renewal after an episode of great difficulty or

depression corresponding to the cold and snow of winter. The poem's words describing the death and rebirth are "suppressing," "remembering," "earth," and "damp earth." What do these words, and the use of the words "yes risk joy" near the poem's end, indicate about the speaker's character and her relationship with the cyclical patterns of nature?

2. *Character as revealed by interaction.* Poems based in a dramatic situation yield best to this treatment. Browning's "My Last Duchess" (this chapter) is a fine example, as are Hardy's "Channel Firing" (Chapter 14) and Jonson's "Drink to Me, Only with Thine Eyes" (this chapter). The situation in Arnold's "Dover Beach" is that the speaker is talking directly to a listener who is deeply close to him, his "love." What does the speaker's attitude toward the listener reveal about his character? In this and other poems, what do you learn about relationships and how they have affected the poetic characters?

3. *Character as revealed by circumstance or setting.* The essay based on the interrelationship of character and setting assumes that time, place, artifacts, money, family, culture, and history influence character and motivation, and also that individual and collective traits are developed as people try to control their surroundings. For instance, the speaker of Wright's "A Blessing" describes the thrill of becoming a witness of a roadside pasture, and at the end of the poem he feels as though he is about to "break / Into blossom." What enables him to reach this joyful conclusion? Why does he feel safe rather than frightened? Why does he believe in the benevolence of the two ponies, and, in turn, why do the ponies treat him with affection? What aspects of character enable him to step over the barbed wire without fear and to believe that the experience is really a "blessing"? Would such an experience have been possible at a more suspicious, less civilized time, when people stepping uninvited onto property might have been considered intruders and peppered with buckshot? In short, how has setting in the broadest sense merged with the speaker's character?

In dealing with the interrelationship of character and external situation, you might be able to organize the body of your essay by relying on certain aspects of the setting. Thus you might select the details about past, present, and future time in Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Similarly, the details about the roaring surf and the dim lights in Arnold's "Dover Beach" can provide thematic links for a discussion of the speaker's sense of alienation, loss, and dedication. In such ways, you may use aspects of setting not only as topics to shed light on character but also to guide and shape your essay.

Whatever strategy you choose, remember that the organization of your essay will finally be determined by your poem. Each poem suggests its own avenues of exploration, directing your thought and organization.

In your conclusion you might summarize your major points about the character or characters, or you might tie your ideas into an assessment of the poem as a whole. Thus, you might briefly discuss the connection between character and character, character and environment, character and death, character and greed, character and love, and so on, and deal with these topics generally as you write your final sentences.

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.

Yen I

Irene Yen

Professor Rosen

English 103

24 November 2010

The Character of the Duke in Browning's "My Last Duchess"

[1] In this dramatic monologue, Browning skillfully develops the character of his speaker, who holds the high position of Duke of Ferrara (in Italy) during the sixteenth century, a period of aristocratic absolutism. Because the duke is at the top of the political and social mountain, he exerts absolute control, whether for good or for bad. Browning's Duke is bad, and he is not just bad, but he is totally evil. * He reveals this evil in his one-way conversation with the listener, who is an envoy of a less powerful aristocrat, the count, whose daughter the Duke is claiming in marriage. The Duke's evil character is brought out by his indulgence in power, his intimidation of others, his manipulation of his dead wife, and his general contempt for others. †

[2] The Duke's indulgence in power, the basis of his evil, is apparent in his use of indirect speech. On the surface, Browning makes him seem intelligent, civilized, and friendly. The Duke begins speaking by pointing out to his listener the beauty of a painting of his "last Duchess," but his entire speech—comprising the entire poem—reveals the horror of his self-indulgence. His indirect but threatening description of how he treated the duchess shows that he delights in evil. When he says "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" (lines 45–46), he is

*This poem appears on page 720.

*Central idea.

†Thesis sentence.

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actually bragging about how he had the duchess killed. He is coldly horrible, the more so because he masks his evil with quiet words and a love of good art.

[3] The Duke's intimidation of others is another of his horrible qualities. Early in the poem it seems that he is doing no more than telling about his dead wife, but the poem makes clear that he is intimidating both his listener—the Count's envoy—and also the Count, the listener's master. The last nine lines (48–56) indicate that his uninterrupted monologue should have been a dialogue in which he should have been negotiating the terms for the dowry he is to receive from the Count. The fact that he has talked only about how he got rid of his "last Duchess" shows his arrogance. Thus, there is no mention of dowry until lines 48–53, when the duke states that he will make a "just pretense" for a dowry which of course the Count will honor (for "just pretense," read a demand for all the Count's money and land). In addition, the Duke's commands, "Will't please you rise? We'll meet / The company below, then," indicate that the negotiation that never began is now over and that the envoy is totally in his power. This is intimidation of the most ruthless and inhuman sort.

[4] The Duke's evil nature is also brought out in his description of the Duchess. If we study his words to determine what the Duchess was really like, we conclude that she was even-tempered and pleasant to all—the soul of graciousness and courtesy. In fact, it would be hard to say that she was anything but perfect. But the Duke, rather than indicating pleasure with her, states that she was ungrateful because she was not submissive enough to him. He complains that the smile she gave to others was the same as the smile she gave to him (it probably was not; we may conclude that her smile to him probably covered fear):

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,

Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without

Much the same smile? (43–45)

These lines show that the Duke is a manipulator and that the poor Duchess was in an impossible situation. Very likely he would have complained also if she had

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smiled only at him and not at others—thereby leaving herself open to the Duke’s perverted judgment that she did not show the graciousness toward others that he expected from his wife. No matter how good she was, there was no way for her to have pleased him. He would have manipulated her into an unfavorable position that would have justified his giving the “commands” to remove her.

[5] Perhaps the worst of this monster’s traits is the contempt he shows for people by thinking of them not as human beings but rather as things. Most notable is the way he thinks of the Duchess; he calls her painting a “piece” (3) to hang on a wall, looking “as if she were alive” (2). He does not even name her, or recognize her humanity by calling her “the late Duchess,” and he speaks about the bronze statue of Neptune “taming a sea horse” (55) as being equal to her. This same contempt for people is shown in his claim that his interest in the Count’s daughter is the “fair daughter’s self” (52), while the rest of the poem makes clear that he wants only wealth and power out of the new marriage. Oddly, also, he seems to think of himself less as a person than as a “nine-hundred-years-old name” (33), and it is this intangible distinction that he prizes above his own humanity. In other words, he views even himself with contempt.

[6] Browning’s Duke, then, is a person with absolute power but without the kindness and understanding to use it for anyone but himself. His complaints about the dead Duchess are meaningless, for they are no more than pretenses for cruel self-indulgence. He is at the top of the power structure, and therefore he is able to do what he wants without reprisal. People must defer to him and obey him, but only because he makes everyone afraid. His intimidation, his manipulation, his lust for power—all govern him, and leave him unable to look at human beings as anything more than pawns in his game for control. He is an example of the saying that absolute power corrupts absolutely, and his character is therefore a frightening portrait of evil.

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Work Cited

Browning, Robert. “My Last Duchess.” *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*. Ed. Edgar V. Roberts and Robert Zweig. 10th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2012. 720–22. Print.

Commentary on the Essay

Because the subject of the discussion, the Duke, is the speaker, the essay is based partially on details presented by him, but it is also partially based on interpretations. The principal subject matter is the interaction of the Duke and the subject of the poem—the “last Duchess”—in addition to his interaction with the listener, who is a representative of an inferior aristocrat, and whom he therefore treats with contempt. Elements of setting are also introduced to illuminate the Duke’s character: his works of art, his absolute power, his pride in his name and title, and his wealth. The essay thus illustrates how character can be analyzed with reference to (1) interactions between persons and other persons and also (2) the connections of persons with their surroundings.

The central idea is that the Duke is evil. This point is made in paragraph 1, with sufficient accompanying detail to explain that the Duke’s position enables him to exercise absolute power. Paragraph 2 discloses that indulgence in power is one of his primary evil traits, while paragraphs 3, 4, and 5 bring out habits of intimidation, manipulation, and contempt. The final paragraph summarizes but also asserts that the Duke’s justifications for killing his wife are irrelevant to his real motives of greed and lust for power.

As the essay develops, transitions are effected by words such as “another,” “also,” “worst,” and “then.” The assertions in the essay are supported by references to specific details from the poem, quotations from the poem (with line numbers noted), and interpretations of details.

Writing Topics About Character and Setting in Poetry

Writing Paragraphs

1. In a paragraph compare Laux’s “The Life of Trees” and Brewster’s “Where I Come From” as poems demonstrating the bearing that location and the world of nature have upon human character.
2. Write a paragraph in which you discuss what the speaker knows about the man who is shot in Garrett Hongo’s “The Legend.” What details tell you something about how the speaker thinks of the man? Why does the speaker think it is important to remember him?

Writing Essays

1. Write an essay comparing the speakers of the “passionate shepherd” poems (by Marlowe, Raleigh, and Lewis). How are the speakers alike, and how are they different? How do their words and references indicate their characters? How do the speakers influence your judgments of the poems in which they appear?
2. Write an essay discussing the relationships between location, thought, and character as asserted in the poems by Arnold, Blake, Cowper, Hardy, and Shore. What importance do place and time have on the development of character? How do responses to time, historical period, and place influence ideas about how to live?
3. Consider Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” Rossetti’s “A Christmas Carol,” and Wright’s “A Blessing” as poems embodying a type or types of religious experience. In an essay discuss what common or similar circumstances occasion the religious reflections in the poems? What common ideas and conclusions do the poems express? Describe the nature of the speakers and discuss the ways in which their observations illustrate their qualities. What philosophical or sectarian differences do you find? On the basis of your study, explain typical patterns of religious experience. (For ideas about how to approach this topic, you may wish to consult Chapter 28 and also the section on archetypal criticism in Chapter 27.)

Creative Writing Assignment

1. Write a short poem, biographical or autobiographical, showing how a certain time, place, or experience has shaped a present quality of character and/or a certain decision about life, friendships, and goals.

Library Assignment

1. Use your library resources to locate two university press books about Robert Browning. Analyze the extent to which they discuss Browning’s use of dramatic monologue. With the aid of what you discover, write a brief essay on Browning’s use of the dramatic monologue as a means of disclosing character.



Chapter 14

Imagery: The Poem’s Link to the Senses

In literature, **imagery** refers to words that trigger your imagination to recall and recombine images—memories or mental pictures of sights, sounds, tastes, smells, sensations of touch, and motions. The process is active and even vigorous, for when words or descriptions produce images, you are using your personal experiences with life and language to help you understand the works you are reading. In effect, you are re-creating the work *in your own way* through the controlled stimulation produced by the writer’s words. Imagery is therefore one of the strongest modes of literary expression because it provides a channel to your active imagination, and along this channel, writers bring their works directly to you and into your consciousness.

For example, reading the word *lake* may bring to your mind your literal memory of a particular lake. Your mental picture—or image—may be a distant view of calm waters reflecting blue sky, a nearby view of gentle waves rippling in the wind, a close-up view of the sandy lake bottom from a boat, or an overhead view of a sun-drenched shoreline. Similarly, the words *rose*, *apple*, *hot dog*, *malted milk*, and *pizza* all cause you to recollect these objects, and, in addition, may cause you to recall their smells and tastes. Active and graphic words like *row*, *swim*, and *dive* stimulate you to picture moving images of someone performing these actions.

A comparison with the art of painting may be additionally instructive. In Frida Kárllo’s “The Two Fridas” (1–2), there are two separate self-images, sitting calmly side by side. The two figures are dressed differently, suggesting the artist’s idea that she has two different roles to play in her life. Of special note, however, is the shocking detail that both figures are shown with open hearts, which are connected by open and exposed arteries passing between them. The same blood, in short, is sustaining the lives of both subjects. The left-hand Frida is stanching a flow of blood with an arterial clamp, but nevertheless an amount of blood has stained her white dress, whereas the arteries of the right-hand Frida, though open, are not comparably afflicted. These side-by-side images suggest that the artist is showing that, for whatever reason, her opposing commitments are so powerful that they are potentially draining her of life itself. Here, the artist has used external images to reveal an overwhelming inner personal dilemma.

Responses and the Poet’s Use of Detail

In studying imagery, we try to comprehend and explain our imaginative reconstruction of the pictures and impressions evoked by the poem’s images. We let the poet’s words simmer and percolate in our minds. To get our imaginations stirring,