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Andrea del Sarto by Robert Browning

About Robert Browning

Robert Browning was born in Camberwell, London in May of 1812. His father was able to accumulate a large library containing around 6,000 books. This would form the basis of Browning's early education and stimulate his interest in literature. From early in his life Browning's family supported his poetic aspirations and helped him financially as well as with the publishing of his first works. He lived with his family until he met and married the fellow poet, Elizabeth Barrett. Elizabeth and Robert moved to live in Florence, Italy. They had a son in 1849 and Browning's rate of production dropped off significantly. Elizabeth, now known by her married name, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, died in 1861. After this, Browning and his son moved back to England.

After receiving mixed reviews from critics when he was young, Browning finally gained some critical acclaim when he was in his 50s. His greatest work, *The Ring and the Book* was published in 1868-69.

Before Browning's death in 1889 in Venice, he lived to see the formation of the Browning Society and received an honorary Doctorate of Civil Law from Balliol College at Oxford University. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Andrea del Sarto by Robert Browning

'Andrea del Sarto' by Robert Browning tells the story of the largely unremarkable career of Andrea del Sarto. 'Andrea del Sarto' by Robert Browning was published in the collection, *Men and Women*. It is written in the form of a dramatic monologue told from the perspective of the Italian Renaissance painter, Andrea del Sarto. The poem begins with the speaker, the artist Andrea del Sarto, asking his wife, Lucrezia, to come and sit with him for a moment without fighting. He wants the two of them to have a quiet moment together before he jumps into a reflection of his life. The speaker begins by describing the passage of time and the lack of control he feels he had over his life.

The speaker then spends the majority of the poem discussing how his skill level compares to the work of other artists. He knows that he has more skill than others such as Michelangelo or Raphael, but his art does not have the soul the others can tap into. Somehow, they have been able to enter heaven and leave with inspiration that he never receives. The artist is disappointed by this fact as no one seems to value his own art the way he thinks they should. At points, he tries to put most of the blame for his life onto his wife. He thinks that she is the one that has been holding him back. He points out the fact that the other artists don't have the same impediment. He thinks about the time that he spent in France working for the king. There, he was applauded by the court but then forced back to Italy by his wife who was tired of the way things were.

By the end of the poem, he concludes that although his life has not been what he wanted he knows that he cannot change it. He is happy to have spent this time with his wife and says as much to her. This nice moment is interrupted by the arrival of Lucrezia's cousin. This

“cousin” is demanding money from del Sarto to help pay off gambling debts. He gives in to the request and tells his wife, solemnly and sadly, that she can go.

Analysis of Andrea del Sarto

Lines 1-10

But do not let us quarrel any more, No,
my Lucrezia; bear with me for once:
Sit down and all shall happen as you wish.
You turn your face, but does it bring your heart?
I'll work then for your friend's friend, never fear,
Treat his own subject after his own way,
Fix his own time, accept too his own price,
And shut the money into this small hand
When next it takes mine. Will it? tenderly?
Oh, I'll content him,—but to-morrow, Love!

The speaker of this poem, Andrea del Sarto, begins the piece by addressing his wife. These two will be the predominant characters that feature in this poem and many parts of the monologue are clearly spoken to Lucrezia. He asks her at the beginning of the poem if they can just have one moment in which they are not fighting or “quarrel[ing].” He hopes that she will listen to him for just this once as he has every intention of conceding to her wishes. Lucrezia turns her face towards the speaker but he does not believe that she is genuine. He asks her if she brought “her heart” to their conversation.

Del Sarto tells his wife that he is willing to do what she asked and pay, or lend money to her “friend’s friend. It is unclear why the friend needs money but he promises to do it “to-morrow.”

Lines 11-20

I often am much wearier than you think,
This evening more than usual, and it seems
As if—forgive now—should you let me sit
Here by the window with your hand in mine
And look a half-hour forth on Fiesole,
Both of one mind, as married people use,
Quietly, quietly the evening through,
I might get up to-morrow to my work
Cheerful and fresh as ever. Let us try.
To-morrow, how you shall be glad for this!

He confesses to her at the beginning of this section, in an attempt to keep her full attention, that oftentimes he is much “wearier” than she might think, and especially so this evening. To help remedy this weariness, del Sarto asks that Lucrezia come and sit by him, with her hand in his, and look out on “Fiesole,” a section of Florence, Italy. Together there they will sit “quietly,” and maybe be able to refresh themselves for the next day.

Lines 21-28

Your soft hand is a woman of itself,
And mine the man's bared breast she curls inside.
Don't count the time lost, neither; you must serve
For each of the five pictures we require: It saves
a model. So! keep looking so— My serpentine
beauty, rounds on rounds!
—How could you ever prick those perfect ears,
Even to put the pearl there! oh, so sweet—

The speaker is deeply endeared by the feeling of his wife's hand. He sees it as being a representation of her entire body that can curl inside his own, a representation of "the man's bared breast." He is cherishing how his wife appears to him at this moment. He sees her as being a "serpentine beauty" that will serve him as the model for "five pictures" that he is planning. He says that it will save them money that way and he would rather paint her anyway. She's so perfect and pristine that he can't imagine why she would ever even pierce her ear to wear earrings.

Lines 29-40

My face, my moon, my everybody's moon,
Which everybody looks on and calls his, And,
I suppose, is looked on by in turn,
While she looks—no one's: very dear, no less.
You smile? why, there's my picture ready made,
There's what we painters call our harmony!
A common greyness silvers everything,—
All in a twilight, you and I alike
—You, at the point of your first pride in me
(That's gone you know),—but I, at every point; My
youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down To
yonder sober pleasant Fiesole.

He continues to lavish praise on his wife as he thinks about her image hanging in the homes of men that have purchased his work. Each of these men looks at the painting and considers it theirs but she does not belong to any of them. The speaker seems to believe that Lucrezia is the ideal model for his work as he says that with one smile from her he can compose a whole painting. That is all the inspiration that he needs. She is what "painters call our harmony!" She is his muse.

He remembers a time when they were both new to one another when they first met. Initially, she was proud of who he was and what he was going to be, but he knows that is "gone." Additionally, he says that back then he had his, "youth...hope...[and] art" that he was living through. All this has been "toned down" later in life as things did not turn out quite as he expected.

Lines 41- 51

There's the bell clinking from the chapel-top;
That length of convent-wall across the way
Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside;
The last monk leaves the garden; days decrease, And
autumn grows, autumn in everything.
Eh? the whole seems to fall into a shape
As if I saw alike my work and self
And all that I was born to be and do,
A twilight-piece. Love, we are in God's hand. How
strange now, looks the life he makes us lead; So
free we seem, so fettered fast we are!

From where the two are sitting overlooking Fiesole, he can hear the chiming, or "clinking" of a bell "from the chapel-top" as well as observe the church and the "last monk" leaving the garden for the day. The speaker then takes a moment here to ponder how "we," he and Lucrezia, as well as all of humankind, are in "God's hand." Time is passing, allowing him to look back on his life and see if he was able to accomplish what he wanted. He recognizes that the life God makes for "us" is both free and "fettered."

Lines 52-59

I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!
This chamber for example—turn your head—
All that's behind us! You don't understand
Nor care to understand about my art,
But you can hear at least when people speak:
And that cartoon, the second from the door —It is the thing, Love! so such things should be—
Behold Madonna!—I am bold to say. The speaker believes that God made a "fetter" for human
life and let it do what it wanted to. At this point in the poem, the speaker begins to lament the
career that he did not quite have. He believes that all those throughout his life did not truly
understand his art. They did not care to take the time to truly see it. Del Sarto does mention an
instance of happiness, that was more than likely reoccurring, as people commented from afar
that his "cartoon," or sketch for a painting, was just "the thing." Many have felt "Love!" For
his work, but just not to the extent that he feels he deserves.

Lines 60-67

I can do with my pencil what I know,
What I see, what at bottom of my heart
I wish for, if I ever wish so deep— Do
easily, too—when I say, perfectly,
I do not boast, perhaps: yourself are judge,
Who listened to the Legate's talk last week, And
just as much they used to say in France.
At any rate 'tis easy, all of it!

The artist knows the skills that he possesses, and he can feel his own ability, coming from his heart, that allows him to create anything. It is easy for him to do “perfectly” what others struggle with. He does interject here to say that he does not want to sound like he’s bragging, but “you,” meaning Lucrezia, know of “my” ability and the ease with which “I” create.

Lines 68-77

No sketches first, no studies, that’s long past: I
do what many dream of, all their lives,
—Dream? strive to do, and agonize to do,
And fail in doing. I could count twenty such
On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,
Who strive—you don’t know how the others strive
To paint a little thing like that you smeared
Carelessly passing with your robes afloat,— Yet
do much less, so much less, Someone says, (I
know his name, no matter)—so much less!

The speaker goes on, allowing himself a few more lines of self-indulgence saying that he has never needed to sketch or study a subject before he draws it. He can do what many “strive to do, and agonize to do, / And fail in doing.” There are many such men in this town.

Lines 78-87

Well, less is more, Lucrezia: I am judged.
There burns a truer light of God in them,
In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,
Heart, or whate’er else, than goes on to prompt
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman’s hand of mine.
Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
Reach many a time a heaven that’s shut to me, Enter
and take their place there sure enough,
Though they come back and cannot tell the world.
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.

While these men may envy the ease with which he creates perfect paintings, he does not have something that they do. They have in them a true light of God that exists in their “vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain.” These men are blessed by God but also suffer for his gifts. Del Sarto goes back to speaking about himself, using an insult that is often cast his way. He calls his own hand that of a “craftsman” that does not create with heart, only with skill. His art and his mind are “shut” out of heaven where the other men are readily entering and exiting with the subjects they paint. He can get close to heaven, but not quite all the way.

Lines 88-96

The sudden blood of these men! at a word—

Praise them, it boils, or blame them, it boils too. I,
 painting from myself and to myself,
 Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame Or
 their praise either. Somebody remarks
 Morello's outline there is wrongly traced, His
 hue mistaken; what of that? or else,
 Rightly traced and well ordered; what of that?
 Speak as they please, what does the mountain care?

The speaker has now worked himself into a serious frustration at the state of his own artistic ability. He is trying to find flaws in "these men" that can tap into the divine subject matter. While del Sarto sees himself as being even-tempered, "these men" are easy to upset and quick to cast blame on others. Whenever someone comments on his work and critiques his efforts he thinks, "what of that?" He doesn't care if he is criticized for how something is drawn because he knows his own skill.

Lines 97-106

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
 Or what's a heaven for? All is silver-grey, Placid
 and perfect with my art: the worse!
 I know both what I want and what might gain,
 And yet how profitless to know, to sigh
 "Had I been two, another and myself,
 "Our head would have o'erlooked the world!" No doubt.
 Yonder's a work now, of that famous youth
 The Urbinate who died five years ago. ('Tis
 copied, George Vasari sent it me.)

All this being said, the speaker knows that a man should reach for things that might seem unattainable. He looks at his own work and sees how it is perfectly one thing. It is "Placid" in a way that bothers him. Even though he can see what he wants to create, he is unable to imbue his art with the soul that other's works have. He knows that if he had been "two" different people in one body, himself, and someone with the skill of Michelangelo, he would have conquered the world of art. From where the speaker is sitting he references a piece of art across the room. This line drags the audience back into the physical room with del Sarto and Lucrezia. The piece that he is referencing was sent to him by "George Vasari," the famous Italian biographer of artists and their works.

Lines 107-114

Well, I can fancy how he did it all,
 Pouring his soul, with kings and popes to see,
 Reaching, that heaven might so replenish him,
 Above and through his art—for it gives way;
 That arm is wrongly put—and there again—
 A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines,

Its body, so to speak: its soul is right,
He means right—that, a child may understand.

This particular piece is easy for the speaker to break down. He knows how it was painted and how the artist “Pour[ed] his soul” into the art for “kings and popes to see.” The art may be beautiful in its conception but del Sarto, with his eye for detail, can see that the “arm is wrongly put” and that there are faults in the “drawing’s lines.” These details are excused by other viewers as its “soul is right.” All may understand that, even a child.

Lines 115-126

Still, what an arm! and I could alter it: But all
the play, the insight and the stretch— (Out of
me, out of me! And wherefore out? Had you
enjoined them on me, given me soul, We
might have risen to Rafael, I and you! Nay,
Love, you did give all I asked, I think—
More than I merit, yes, by many times.
But had you—oh, with the same perfect brow,
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth, And
the low [voice](#) my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler’s pipe, and follows to the snare —
Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!

Even del Sarto understands that even if the arm is not quite right, it is still beautiful. He knows that with his skill he could fix it. Once more he bemoans the fact that he was not given the soul to rise above everyone else. He could have even surpassed “Rafael.” He refers to himself and Lucrezia as rising together through the ranks of the art world and that if she with all of her perfections of physical beauty, only brought with her a mind that might have improved del Sarto’s life. He is casting part of his disappointment in himself onto her.

Lines 127-136

Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged
“God and the glory! never care for gain. “The
present by the future, what is that?
“Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!
“Rafael is waiting: up to God, all three!” I
might have done it for you. So it seems:
Perhaps not. All is as God over-rules.
Beside, incentives come from the soul’s self; The
rest avail not. Why do I need you?
What wife had Rafael, or has Agnolo?

Some women, the speaker states, do bring brains with them into their marriages. Why, he thinks, didn’t his wife? The next lines of the poem are what the speaker wishes his wife had said to him throughout his life. If she had really wanted to help his career and further his art she would have told him that he should give all glory to God without caring for “gain.” He

should be attempting to raise himself to the status of “Agnolo,” meaning Michelangelo or climb up to where “Rafael,” or Raphael, is. If she had said this he might have done it for her. Or, he says, maybe it wouldn’t have worked that way because God controls everything. He changes his tone here and says that it was not her fault for not speaking up to him. Instead, he should never have had a wife in the first place, like Michelangelo and Raphael.

Lines 137-148

In this world, who can do a thing, will not; And
 who would do it, cannot, I perceive:
 Yet the will’s somewhat—somewhat, too, the power—
 And thus we half-men struggle. At the end, God, I
 conclude, compensates, punishes. ‘Tis safer for me, if
 the award be strict,
 That I am something underrated here,
 Poor this long while, despised, to speak the truth.
 I dared not, do you know, leave home all day, For
 fear of chancing on the Paris lords.
 The best is when they pass and look [aside](#); But
 they speak sometimes; I must bear it all.

In the world in which they are living, the speaker says that the men who want to do something are unable to, and the men who can do it, won’t. This is frustrating to him and to all the “half-men” that are only blessed with half the talent they need. He decides that it is safer for him to have been given the life he has as he was not fit for one in which he has to speak with the “Paris lords.” He claims to like it when they ignore him.

Lines 149- 161

Well may they speak! That Francis, that first time, And
 that long festal year at Fontainebleau!
 I surely then could sometimes leave the ground,
 Put on the glory, Rafael’s daily wear,
 In that humane great monarch’s golden look,— One
 finger in his beard or twisted curl
 Over his mouth’s good mark that made the smile,
 One arm about my shoulder, round my neck,
 The jingle of his gold chain in my ear,
 I painting proudly with his breath on me,
 All his court round him, seeing with his eyes,
 Such frank French eyes, and such a fire of souls
 Profuse, my hand kept plying by those hearts,—

In this stanza, the speaker is slightly standing up against those that talk about him unkindly. He is remembering when he worked for the king of France, Francis, and was at Fontainebleau for a year. It was here that he had confidence and could put on the clothes, or stature of Raphael. This was caused by his closeness with the king. He remembers how Francis’

clothes sounded when he walked and how he stood over his shoulder as the speaker painted. When he had this position he was admired by the French court and with his paint, he could influence them and gain confidence from their looks.

Lines 162- 171

And, best of all, this, this, this face beyond, This
in the background, waiting on my work, To
crown the issue with a last reward!
A good time, was it not, my kingly days?
And had you not grown restless... but I know—
'Tis done and past: 'twas right, my instinct said:
Too live the life grew, golden and not grey, And
I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt Out of
the grange whose four walls make his world.
How could it end in any other way?

One more he speaks directly to his wife. He remembers that in those days the best thing of all was her face waiting for him, approving of his work. He asks her if these days were not “kingly,” and says that it is her fault, “had [she] not grown restless...” and made him leave, his future might have been brighter. But, he concedes, what’s “done” is done. At this point in his life, he is but a “weak-eyed bat” that cannot be tempted out of his routine and “four walls.” He despondently concludes this section by saying that it could not have ended any other way.

Lines 172-182

You called me, and I came home to your heart.
The triumph was—to reach and stay there; since
I reached it ere the triumph, what is lost?
Let my hands frame your face in your hair's gold, You
beautiful Lucrezia that are mine!
“Rafael did this, Andrea painted that;
“The Roman's is the better when you pray,
“But still the other's Virgin was his wife—”
Men will excuse me. I am glad to judge Both
pictures in your presence; clearer grows My
better fortune, I resolve to think.

It appears as if Lucrezia, bored with their situation in France, had asked him to come home and so he did. He reaches his hands up to “frame” her face and golden hair and comforts himself by remembering that she is his. He “resolve[s] to think” that ending up with her, rather than painting something lasting, was his “better fortune.”

Lines 183-193

For, do you know, Lucrezia, as God lives,
Said one day Agnolo, his very self,
To Rafael . . . I have known it all these years . . .

(When the young man was flaming out his thoughts
Upon a palace-wall for Rome to see, Too
lifted up in heart because of it)

“Friend, there’s a certain sorry little scrub

“Goes up and down our Florence, none cares how,

“Who, were he set to plan and execute

“As you are, pricked on by your popes and kings,

“Would bring the sweat into that brow of yours!”

Andrea del Sarto continues to speak to his wife, Lucrezia, imploring her to understand the daily trauma he goes through as he thinks about his place amongst the great artists. He imagines a conversation between the two great Renaissance masters, Raphael and Michelangelo. He likes to think of Michelangelo saying to Raphael, as he paints in Rome, that there is another artist that works in “our Florence” and is not acknowledged. This man, if he were to be given the same commissions that “you,” meaning Raphael, were given, then he would give you serious competition. To retain his place as one of the greatest painters of all time, Raphael would have “sweat” on his “brow.” This is of course a completely imagined conversation that del Sarto thinks up as he dreams of what he wishes people thought of him.

Lines 194- 204

To Rafael’s!—And indeed the arm is wrong.

I hardly dare . . . yet, only you to see,

Give the chalk here—quick, thus, the line should go!

Ay, but the soul! he’s Rafael! rub it out! Still,

all I care for, if he spoke the truth,

(What he? why, who but Michel Agnolo?

Do you forget already words like those?)

If really there was such a [chance](#), so lost,—

Is, whether you’re—not grateful—but more pleased.

Well, let me think so. And you smile indeed!

This hour has been an hour! Another smile?

In a torrent of emotion, contrary to how he portrayed himself previously, del Sarto turns to the Raphael copy that Vasari gave him and begins to make adjustments. He makes lines here and there, hoping to fix the arm, but then backtracks. He does not want to destroy the “soul” of the painting. “He’s Rafael!” Anything that del Sarto does to the painting will seem trite in comparison. The speaker, now relaxed again, thinks once more about this imagined opportunity to have the same type of commissions that Raphael received. He dreams if only “really there was such a chance.” He hopes that if this had been the case, Lucrezia would have been proud of him. Already an hour has passed during this conversation and he sees it as being a productive one.

Lines 205- 213

If you would sit thus by me every night I
should work better, do you comprehend?

I mean that I should earn more, give you more.
 See, it is settled dusk now; there's a star; Morello's
 gone, the watch-lights show the wall, The cue-
 owls speak the name we call them by.
 Come from the window, love,—come in, at last, Inside
 the melancholy little house
 We built to be so gay with. God is just.

He tells her that if only she would take the time to sit with him every night, that he would work “better.” He would create better work, but he would also be able to take better care of her and give her more. The sun has set and it has “settled dusk now.” There is a star in the sky and the owls are hooting around them. He tells her to come away from the window and deeper into their “melancholy little house.”

Lines 214-223

King Francis may forgive me: oft at nights
 When I look up from painting, eyes tired out,
 The walls become illumined, brick from brick
 Distinct, instead of mortar, fierce bright gold, That
 gold of his I did cement them with!
 Let us but love each other. Must you go?
 That Cousin here again? he waits outside?
 Must see you—you, and not with me? Those loans?
 More gaming debts to pay? you smiled for that?
 Well, let smiles buy me! have you more to spend?

As the speaker is pondering how the king of France now regards him, he is staring around the room imagining the house transformed into a palace. His daydream is interrupted by the appearance of his wife's “Cousin” who is waiting for her outside. He does not want her to go, especially since the cousin is demanding money to pay off his gambling debts. He believes that she treated him kindly over the last hour in an attempt to get the money that her cousin needs.

Lines 224-234

While hand and eye and something of a heart
 Are left me, work's my ware, and what's it worth?
 I'll pay my fancy. Only let me sit
 The grey remainder of the evening out,
 Idle, you call it, and muse perfectly
 How I could paint, were I but back in France,
 One picture, just one more—the Virgin's face,
 Not yours this time! I want you at my side
 To hear them—that is, Michel Agnolo— Judge
 all I do and tell you of its worth.
 Will you? To-morrow, satisfy your friend.

Del Sarto feels a new pang of loss as his wife is leaving him that night. He knows that he still has his work and “some of a heart,” left but “what,” he asks, is “it worth?” He agrees to pay the money but only if he can be let alone brood through the rest of the evening. He thinks that if he could only paint one more picture, it would depict the “Virgin’s face,” and not this time modeled after Lucrezia. He wants her there beside him, not in the picture. He wants to prove himself and have her hear all the wonderful things that the others will say about him. But this is all tomorrow. For now, he tells her she can, “satisfy” her friend.

Lines 235- 243

I take the subjects for his corridor,
 Finish the portrait out of hand—there, there,
 And throw him in another thing or two
 If he demurs; the whole should prove enough
 To pay for this same Cousin’s freak. Beside,
 What’s better and what’s all I care about, Get
 you the thirteen scudi for the ruff!
 Love, does that please you? Ah, but what does he, The
 Cousin! what does he to please you more?

In this stanza, it becomes clear that the relationship between the cousin and Lucrezia might be romantic. The speaker seems to understand this but knows that he cannot do anything to stop her. He gives her the “thirteen scudi” to pass on to the man, or “ruff” as he calls him. He asks if this amount pleases her and then asks what exactly the “cousin” does to please her more. He does not expect an answer to this question.

Lines 244-252

I am grown peaceful as old age to-night.
 I regret little, I would change still less.
 Since there my past life lies, why alter it?
 The very wrong to Francis!—it is true
 I took his coin, was tempted and complied,
 And built this house and sinned, and all is said.
 My father and my mother died of want. Well,
 had I riches of my own? you see
 How one gets rich! Let each one bear his lot.

The last section of the poem breaks into one more long stanza. At the end of this night as he is looking back on his life he claims to “regret little,” and desire to “change still less.” It is hard to believe this assertion as he has spent the entire poem talking about how he wishes his life had been different. He does know though that there is no way that he can alter his “past life.” He declares that the time he spent in France with King Francis was wrong. That he never should have taken “his coin.” He may have been able to amass a bit of money off the king’s patronage, but he still was never happy.

Lines 253-267

They were born poor, lived poor, and poor they died:

And I have laboured somewhat in my time
And not been paid profusely. Some good son Paint
my two hundred pictures—let him try!
No doubt, there's something strikes a balance. Yes, You
loved me quite enough. it seems to-night.
This must suffice me here. What would one have?
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance—
Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,
Meted on each side by the angel's reed, For
Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me
To cover—the three first without a wife,
While I have mine! So—still they overcome Because
there's still Lucrezia,—as I choose.
Again the Cousin's whistle! Go, my Love.

The last section of the poem concludes on a very solemn and self-pitying note with the speaker relating his own life to that of his parents. They were “born poor, lived poor, and poor they died.” The speaker knows that he has “laboured” in his days on the earth and that he has not been paid well for it. He questions whether he has been a good son to his parents and knows that other “good sons” would not have been able to paint the “two hundred pictures” that he did. Once more he turns to Lucrezia and tells her that, yes, “You loved me quite enough,” tonight. He must be happy with what he has received from her, and from life itself. He thinks that maybe he will have a new chance at success in heaven, but still, he will have his wife. When Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael get to heaven, they will not be married, but he will. He concludes the poem with this reiteration, and misdirection of blame onto his wife. He tells her afterward that now she may go as her “Cousin” is whistling at her.

O Captain! My Captain! by Walt Whitman

Saddened by the results of the American civil war, Walt Whitman wrote the elegy, ‘O Captain! My Captain!’ in memory of deceased American President Abraham Lincoln in 1865. The civil war occurred during his lifetime with Whitman a staunch supporter of unionists.

Walt Whitman's masterpiece, '*O Captain! My Captain!*' moves with a sheer melancholic tone throughout its entirety. He was the new-age poet, poised with breaking away from the shackles of established poetic practices and forming new ones just as America is created for a different purpose, tearing away from the yoke of colonialism and steering clear of undermining the proletariat class. On the other hand, Walt Whitman uses similar poetic devices like that of William Wordsworth and Dante Alighieri. Speaking in the language of ordinary men, Walt Whitman aspired to become the voice of the nation, speaking on the behest of the American population at the time. As a result, he has recorded the events, moods, and spirit of the time magnificently.

Summary

'O Captain! My Captain!' by Walt Whitman is a heart-touching elegy on the death of the American President Abraham Lincoln.

The speaker's coming to terms with the death of his fallen comrade is the focal point of the poem at hand. At the start of the poem, the speaker attempts to come to reality as he observes his dead captain on the deck. Slowly and gradually, he realizes that the change is permanent and life must go, regardless. The end of the Civil War was supposedly a moment of rejoicing for the American populace, instead, it became an event of mourning. The conclusion of the Civil War has brought with it national mourning and a period of reflection.

O Captain! My Captain! Meaning

The title of the poem, 'O Captain! My Captain!' refers to Abraham Lincoln as a captain of the ship. Here, the "ship" is a symbol of the civil war fought for liberating the slaves. According to the poet, the ship is sailing nearer to the shore, meaning the war is about to end. They have achieved their coveted goal. Being a moment of victory, everyone is happy. However, they have to consider, at the same time, that their metaphorical "captain" of the ship is no more. When he lived, he guided the multitude with his fatherly guidance. After his death, the nation is fatherless. In this agony, the poet writes the verses. However, the mood of the poem is not gloomy. Even if they have lost Lincoln, the dream Lincoln has seen is not lost.

Structure

The poem, 'O Captain! My Captain!' consists of 3 stanzas in totality having 2 quatrains in each. A quatrain is a stanza consisting of four lines. Besides, this poem is an elegy. An elegy is known as a mourning poem. Apart from that, Whitman uses the free verse form while writing this poem. For this reason, the lines of the poem do not rhyme at all. Yet there are some instances where one can find the use of rhyming. As an example, in the second part of the first stanza, the words "red" and "dead" rhyme together. Thereafter, the poet mostly uses the iambic meter in this poem. For instance, the first line is in iambic hexameter. The following two lines are in iambic heptameter. While the second quatrain does not follow a specific metrical scheme.

Literary Devices

Most of Walt Whitman's poems use repetition and rhythm for rendering a spellbinding poetic beauty. He uses anaphora constantly as several verses begin with the same word/ phrase. For instance 'When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomers' uses 'when' 4 times to render a lyrical sound. Anaphora is generally used for joyous chants and rendering celebratory feelings in a poem's entirety. 'O Captain! My Captain!' makes use of 'father' and 'heart' to mourn the death of assassinated Abraham Lincoln. Moreover, the fallen ship's captain is a reference to Abraham Lincoln, whereas the ship is also an allusion to the United States of America during its early years of independence.

Themes

Whitman emphasizes the importance of self in the majority of his poems, ranging from 'I Hear America Singing' to others, he prizes the American populace to believe in themselves. More so, he even uses symbolical allusions to drive home a point. He may use inanimate objects for that end. Apart from that, Whitman uses the themes of victory, lamentation, grief, sadness, and loss in his poem, 'O Captain! My Captain!'. Though this poem concerns the theme of victory, it contains a sad note on the death of Lincoln. The poet creates contrast by transposing the images of the joyous crowd beside the lifeless body of the captain. This concoction of emotions resembles the nature of life. Along with that, the themes of grief and lamentation are important aspects of this piece.

Analysis, Stanza by Stanza

Stanza One

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
 The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
 The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
 While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
 But O heart! heart! heart!
 O the bleeding drops of red,
 Where on the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

In the first stanza of 'O Captain! My Captain!', the speaker shouts with sheer excitement to the ship's captain about making it home safe and sound. The ship after enduring tough storms and impenetrable winds made it back on the dock. Jaded and exhausted after a tiresome journey,

the mission has been a roaring success. Although the ship is yet to arrive safely in the harbor, 'land ahoy', 'land ahoy' as the ship is close by and people are seemingly exulted by its sight.

The church bells are ringing and people act animatedly as the ship nigh the shore. The excitement escalates as the boat nears the harbor. The keel has been thrown in to steady the moving ship. The keel is a reference to a 'ship' as well, same as 'all hands on deck' means all people should be ready. As the ship draws near the harbor, the poem takes on a dark turn, foreboding something unfavorable to be revealed. 'Grim and daring' are the terms referring to the twisting mood. The would-be ghost ship carries some unwanted news for the awaiting crowd.

Thereafter, he speaks from the heart. The heart has shattered and torn over the death of the ship's captain. The breakdown of emotions is surging from the sailor as the fallen comrade lies beside him, in all his glory but dead. Drops of blood are flowing on the ship's deck, the blood of Abraham Lincoln.

Stanza Two

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;

Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,

For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,

For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;

Here Captain! dear father!

This arm beneath your head!

It is some dream that on the deck,

You've fallen cold and dead.

The sailor implores the now dead captain to rise from the dead. The act of talking to the dead is known as an apostrophe. The reason being, the people ashore await their prized captain to lead the way and stamp his mark on history. The crowd is jubilant as they celebrate using some devices such as raising the flag in victory, holding flowers, and cheering for the captain. The crowd is getting restless, as anticipation rises to catch a glimpse of their ship's captain. Alas! He's no longer with them.

In actuality, the ship's captain is not his biological father, but truly his respect and reverence for him stand greater than his actual father. The sailor looks at the fallen comrade and wishes this nightmare was just a dream. Alas! As the reality sets in, the sailor realizes, the damage is irreparable.

Stanza Three

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,

My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,

The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,

From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;

Exult O shores, and ring O bells!

But I with mournful tread,

Walk the deck my Captain lies,

Fallen cold and dead.

In the last stanza of 'O Captain! My Captain!', the sailor looks sadly at the dead captain in pure agony. He observes his lips to have paled a la that of a corpse. The captain fails to respond to his cries of helplessness. The liveliness from the captain's face has drained now. His pulse has stopped and he's unlikely to move from now on. The ship has landed safely in the harbor with its anchor thrown in. The voyage is now complete. The sailor reminisces about the trip to be extremely arduous yet they crossed the line with a trade-off.

The concluding lines of the poem explicate the fact that the sailor has some bad news to share with the awaiting crowd. He appeals directly to the loud jeers, cheers, and ringing bells for the much-awaited captain. Again, the poet uses synecdoche to represent the entire American audience at large as the poem relates to the death of Abraham Lincoln. The sailor feels uncomfortable as he needs to relay the bad news to the populace at large, as the victory celebrations come to a standstill eventually.

Historical Context

'O Captain! My Captain!' was authored by famous American poet Walt Whitman. It alluded to President Abraham Lincoln's death in 1865. The poem was a part of his controversially famous collection of poems "Leaves of Grass". The poetic collection continuously was revised to add new poetic pieces from Walt Whitman as a result. 'O Captain! My Captain!' at the time of its publication became an intensely popular poem for classic, read in schools over the years to come. For Whitman, the praise was redundant by all means. Commenting on his poetry, he said that the audience of his time appreciated poetry with form, rhyme, and meter, still unfamiliar to the free-verse concept. The poem moves its reader with utter undertones of remorse and sadness over the conclusion of the Civil War and its dramatic ramifications later, rendering a powerful period poem in the process.

The Road Not Taken

Meaning

Robert Frost's poetic masterpiece is arguably the most infamously misunderstood poem as of yet. Marrying elements of form and content, arresting artistic phraseology and metaphors, the poem is mostly read without being understood. The archetypal conundrum is the primary attraction of the poem, readers instantly relate to their personal experiences. Forks and woods are used as metaphorical devices relating to decisions and crises. Similar forks are representative of everlasting struggle against fate and free will. Since humans are free to select as per their will, their fate is unknown to them. 'The Road Not Taken' actually steers clear of advising on selecting a definitive path. Frost's take on this is slightly complicated. The grassy roads and yellow woods represent the present as the individual views from a future perspective. This self-realization is pathetic and ironic in itself. The future self will regret first his decision about taking the road less traveled on. In hindsight, his regret is everlasting in this case point.

Detailed Analysis

Stanza One

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

'A Road Not Taken' opens with strong imagery, because of the diction used to depict two physical roads separating from each other in "a yellow wood." It is observably a forest that is showcasing the colors of autumn. Line two is hasty to display the theme of regret, by revealing that the individual is "sorry" before he even decides which road to take. We basically find ourselves observing a very important moment, where he has to make a decision that is

evidently difficult for him. Lines three through five, express that the individual is trying to see as far as he can down each road, to help him decide which one he should choose to take.

Let's thoroughly analyze the lines and their meaning below.

Lines 1–2

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

The first two lines of this stanza introduce the dilemma that every human faces, not once, but multiple times in his or her life; the dilemma of choice. We as people go through many circumstances and experiences in our lives, and one of them is choosing between two (or more) paths. This is experienced literally: in the roads we take and the routes we walk daily, and figuratively: when we come to points in our lives where we must make decisions for our next steps, based on the opportunities presented to us. And like the character in 'The Road Not Taken,' oftentimes, we are disappointed that we cannot hold on to, and experience the consequences of every opportunity that is presented to us. In order to gain some things in life, we must let others go.

Lines 3–5

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

By having the character in the poem examine the roads ahead of him, Frost is emphasizing that we all try our best to guess what lays ahead for us in every opportunity that we are presented in an attempt to find some control and later comfort over our final decisions. We like to take our time in order to make informed decisions so we can justify our choices when the regret of missing out on the other "roads" starts to haunt us.

Stanza Two

Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

In this second stanza, lines six through eight: the individual in 'The Road Not Taken' finally makes a decision and chooses a road that he thinks and believes is better, because it looked like not many people had walked on it before. However, in lines nine and ten, he is quick to add that the other road looked equally used in comparison to the one he chose, so it really was not as less traveled as he was telling himself.

Lines 6–7

Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

These lines are important because they clarify the common misunderstanding that one road was less traveled than the other since the character clearly states that both roads were "really about the same." The diction in this stanza portrays the uncertainty of the character as he tries to justify to himself that his decision is the right one for him; and much like anyone else, he is trying to realistically weigh the outcomes of both roads.

Lines 8–10

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

The important idea to note in these lines is that the character claimed the road he chose was better because it "wanted wear" meaning that it was tempting him. He felt that the road he chose "wanted" to be walked on by him. This underlines the nature of people in general, that we will always choose the path which seems attractive and is of interest to us, even if both paths have the equal potential of getting us to wherever it is we are headed. That said the word "want" has historically been used to represent a lack of something. For example "the house was in want of repair" so perhaps the suggestion here is that the path is overgrown because it is less travelled.

Either way no matter where we end up, and how informed, tempting, and satisfying our choices are, we will always wonder about the “what ifs” and the “could have beens” of the other opportunities that we left behind.

Stanza Three

And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

In the third stanza, Robert Frost mentions in lines eleven and twelve that at the moment that this individual was making his decision, both paths were nearly identical. No one had stepped through to disturb the leaves on both roads. Line thirteen is an important point in ‘The Road Not Taken’ as this is when the individual finalizes his decision of leaving the other road, for perhaps another time. Lines fourteen and fifteen give us a glimpse of his doubts. He honestly confesses to himself that it’s highly unlikely he will come back to travel this other road because he knows as he moves forward, he will continue to find other paths taking him further and further away from this point, where he is standing at the moment.

Lines 11–12

And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

The lines show us that this character is truly being honest with himself, as he makes the crucial decision of which road to take. His honesty is a reality check as well as a means of making a final decision. He notices that both choices lay equally in front of him and none of these choices have been “trodden black”. Sometimes in life, when we reach a fork, we are able to make quick decisions based on what we learned from other people’s experiences. These experiences then leave marks in the choices that we have, these marks then form our bias towards or against that path. When we encounter choices in our lives where we find that the leaves are not “trodden black” by what we learned from the people around us, it becomes harder to decide between them, just like the situation of the character in ‘The Road Not Taken’.

Lines 13–15

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

After making his decision, he exclaims that he will leave the first choice for another day. Then he honestly tells himself that if he lets this road go now, there is no coming back. There are many defining decisions in our life that shape our future and sometimes when we select an option in these moments, they change the course of our life and there's no turning back. That is where the regret of not exploring our other options disturbs us.

Stanza Four

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.

In this last stanza, lines sixteen and seventeen, the individual predicts that one day far into the future, he knows will tell the story of this decision that he is now making. Lines eighteen and nineteen expose that he intends to lie and claim he took the less-travelled road. In reality, both were equally travelled. Finally, the last line expresses that the individual is also planning to claim that his choice to take this less travelled road made all the difference, in where he will be standing at the time.

Lines 16–17

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

These lines of the last stanza highlight the nature of our regrets. When it comes to tough decisions in our lives, we always know that no matter what we finally choose, eventually, we will regret not being able to try the possibility that was left uncharted by us. In this stanza, the character is already imagining the regret he will feel and decides that he will not be honest when he retells the story of his decision, as it will not validate his selection of the road if he showcases his regret by stating that an equal opportunity could have landed him elsewhere in life.

Lines 18–20

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

He decides he will tell people he chose the road that was “less traveled by” to come across as a person who took a chance and succeeded in life. In reality, the character is trying to convince himself that when he shares his life experiences and distorts the truth, it will seem that taking this road “made all the difference”.

This teaches readers that they never know where life will take them, so preplanning what the end of the road looks like for themselves, and building regret is silly especially if they haven’t even started the journey in the first place. Life is about the paths you do choose to walk through, not about “the road not taken.”

Structure

Robert Frost has used an interesting style in ‘The Road Not Taken’. He works within the form, but at times, the form works within his style. Using variation and his brand of words, Robert Frost’s poems followed a unique composition. At times, he created forms to suit his poetry.

He has a general tendency to work within and without boundaries, carving memorable, identifiable, and idiosyncratic poetry. In his early years, he perfected the art of “sound of sense”, bringing raw sensory perception to a human mind. The sound of words forms imagery due to the form of words and sound of sense.

Robert Frost has penned the poem in the first-person point of view. So, it’s a lyric poem. It comprises five verses encapsulated in four stanzas. So, there are a total of 20 lines in the text. Let’s have a look at the rhyme scheme and meter of this piece.

Rhyme Scheme

This poem follows a set rhyme scheme. In each quintain, the rhyming convention employed is ABAAB. It means that there are two sets of rhymes. The sound with which the first line ends occurs again in the third and fourth lines. While the second and last lines rhyme together.

For example, let's have a look at the rhyme scheme of the first stanza.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

In the first line, "wood" rhymes with the words, "stood" and "could" present in the third and fourth lines. The second line ends with "both". For rhyming, the poet chooses the word "undergrowth" in the last line. The same scheme is followed throughout the poem. There are no such exceptions.

Meter

Each line of this piece consists of nine syllables. Some lines contain a syllable more or less than the average syllable count. While reading the text, the stress generally falls on the second syllable of each foot. So, the overall poem is composed of iambic tetrameter. It means there are a total of four iambs in every line. However, there are a few metrical variations as well.

Let's take the first stanza and scan it metrically.

Two roads/ di-verged/ in a yel-/low wood,

And sor-/ry I/ could not tra-/vel both

And be/ one tra-/ve-ler, long/ I stood

And looked/ down one/ as far/ as I could

To where/ it bent/ in the un-/der-growth;

From the scansion of the first stanza, it is clear that Frost also uses a few anapests here and there throughout the poem. There are a total of four feet in each line. As the majority of the feet are composed of iambs, the dominant meter of this piece is the iambic tetrameter.

Literary Devices

Frost uses several literary devices in 'The Road Not Taken'. To begin with, he uses anaphora in the second, third, and fourth lines of the first stanza. Another important device of this piece is enjambment. It can be seen in the third and fourth lines. Using this device, he maintains the flow in between the lines as well as connects them internally.

Readers can find the use of metonymy in the phrase, "a yellow wood". It refers to the season, autumn, and its effect on nature. There is a symbol in the usage of the word, "undergrowth". It stands for the undiscovered regions of the future.

In the second stanza, readers can find the use of irony in this line, "And having perhaps the better claim." This device is explained further below. Apart from that, Frost uses alliteration in the phrase, "wanted wear".

The third stanza presents an inversion or hyperbaton in this line, "In leaves no step had trodden black." The line also contains a synecdoche. In the following line, readers can find a rhetorical exclamation.

In the last stanza, the poet uses repetition for emphasizing a particular idea. For example, the phrase, "ages and ages" emphasizes the continuity of life's journey. While the repetition of the word, "I" in the end and beginning of the third and fourth lines are meant for the sake of highlighting the speaker's hesitation. Such repetition is also known as anadiplosis. Lastly, the poem ends with a paradox.

Metaphor

Frost uses several metaphors in this poem to bring home his innovative ideas. For example, the title of the poem, 'The Road Not Taken' contains a metaphor. In it, the "road" is a metaphor for the choice we make. Moving on to the text, there is another metaphor in the "yellow wood". In this phrase, the poet implicitly compares the idea of change to the yellowish wood. He compares the speaker of this piece to a traveler who is struck while choosing the best option to carry on his journey. Likewise, readers can find another metaphor in the last stanza. Here, the road "less traveled by" is a metaphor for the choices less preferred by humans. It refers to unconventional things that pragmatic society doesn't follow at all. However, some people choose such unconventional options. So, in the speaker's case, he has not opted for the rarest choice.

Irony

The ironic undertone is inexorable. As he writes,

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

The individual anticipates insincerity in his future, looking in retrospect later on. He's aware that he will be far from correct and even hypocritical at times, looking at his life. Furthermore, he is fully aware that his future self will ultimately deny his past self's decision, asserting it strongly. In essence, there's no definitive true path here. As a result, what lies on the other path may trouble an individual with remnant feelings of guilt afterward. With ironic undertones throughout, the poem contains hints of remorse due to choosing a path without much knowledge about either. Along the way, the individual wonders about the other path and what's irrevocably lost in deselecting it. **Imagery**

The use of imagery, in this piece, makes it an interesting read. It helps readers to imagine the plot of this poem. There is no unnecessary information in the text. Frost begins directly with the primary image of the poem that is of the "two roads diverged in a yellow wood." By using this visual imagery filled with the color of autumn, the poet depicts the place where his speaker is struggling to make a decision. He further describes that the roads bent in the undergrowth. It means that the speaker cannot see what is there ahead of the road. In this way, Frost paints a beautiful picture of two long roads going in two different directions in the woods. Readers can find more secondary details, integral to the main image, in the following stanzas. According to the speaker, the roads more or less look the same. Grasses cover them and one of them is less traveled than the other. Besides, some pale leaves are lying on the road. On one road, he can see trodden, black leaves. While he cannot see such leaves on the other road.

Providing this description, Frost tries to depict two ideas through these images. The first idea is of the choice that one can make easily by learning from the experience of others. Secondly, the image of the less trodden road depicts a way that can be less traveled, but it is less discovered by others.

Tone and Mood

To understand the tone and mood of this poem, readers have to look for the words that have emotions associated with them. One such word appears at the very beginning of the second line. The speaker says, "sorry" for not being able to travel on both roads. How does this particular word influence the poem's tone and mood? First of all, it tells readers that the speaker is not confident enough to make a decision. Therefore he feels sorry for himself. It reflects his mental state as well as the poem's mood that is a little bit drifting towards the lethargic state of mind. Besides, the tone is emotive but not direct as it lacks confidence.

Another phrase, "long I stood" prolongs the mood of indecisiveness and confusion. The tone follows the mood and it changes into an introspective one. In the following stanza, the word "perhaps" in the second line depicts the tone of dilemma. The confused mood of the speaker also confuses the readers. Moving on to the following stanzas, the individual becomes comparably confident yet his tone reflects a sense of grief as he thinks the other road might be better than the one he is about to walk on.

Symbolism

The infamous poem is rich with simplistic literal symbolism. Frost sets up a fictional stage for an individual upon which he sets the direction of his life with irreparable consequences. It's a metaphor for people juggling with lifelong decisions. Seemingly an obvious poem, 'The Road Not Taken' has been subjective, catering to multiple interpretations. According to Robert Frost himself:

You have to be careful of that one; it's a tricky poem—very tricky.

In this piece, readers have to be aware of the use of symbols. The first dilemma that comes across while reading the text is about the actual symbolic significance of the two roads. These roads do not refer to two different paths. Rather Frost points at two superficially identical roads symbolizing the choices a person has to make. He can only choose any one of them as it is literally impossible to be "one traveler" on both roads. Besides, readers can find another symbol in "a yellow wood". It refers to the idea of change.

Themes

The thematic idea of 'The Road Not Taken' intrinsically lies in "carpe diem", judging by its nuance. In conventional carpe diem poems, readers can find that the speaker is urging one to seize the moment and live in the present. Likewise, in this poem, the poet presents a person who is not sure about what to do. He thinks about the future so he cannot make a decision based on the present scenario.

This piece also taps on several other themes such as choice, uncertainty, indecision, fate, and over-thinking. The main theme of this piece is choice and uncertainty. In this poem, the speaker has to make a choice and he is uncertain about the best one. He thinks what he will choose cannot be suitable for him.

The next theme that can be found is indecision. Readers can find this theme in the lines such as, "Then look at the other, as just as fair,/ And having perhaps the better claim." Right after these lines, the speaker says both of them are "really about the same." That's why he struggles with indecision.

It also seems that the speaker is a fatalist. He relies on it more than the present moment. This mindset creates more confusion in his life. Last but not least is overthinking. This theme is present throughout this piece. Here, the narrator has to make a simple decision. But, he thinks more than what is necessary. It leads to all the confusion not only in his case but also in the case of readers.

Historical Context

Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken' depicts the poet or individual looking in retrospect and contemplating upon past decisions. As per a biographical account by Lawrence Thompson, "Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph", the poem was based on his Welsh pal named Edward

Thomas. According to him, his friend was always regretful of his decision, irrespective of the road taken. Considering himself as a regional poet, New England has been used as a recurring location in Robert Frost's poems. He moved to New Hampshire in his early teens. As a result, the rich culture, vivid imagery, history, and landscape are reflected in his published work. Elements such as orchards, forests, fields, and small towns are observed commonly. His narrators are often close to nature, wandering in woods (Read 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'), in snowstorms, and picking apples (Refer to 'After ApplePicking').

The Hippopotamus

'The Hippopotamus' is one of T. S. Eliot's quatrain poems, written just after the First World War and published in his 1919 volume, *Poems*. By turns comical and serious, sincere and playful, high satirical and almost nonsense-like, 'The Hippopotamus' shows a very different T. S. Eliot from the one we glimpse in *The Waste Land*. It is even more interesting as a satire against the Church in light of Eliot's later conversion to the Church of England, in 1927. You can read 'The Hippopotamus' here; below is our analysis.

The 'quatrain' poems which make up all but one of the English poems in *Poems* (the volume also contains a few poems written in French) were inspired by the French example of Théophile Gautier (1811-72), whose volume *Émaux et Camées* Eliot had been encouraged to read by Ezra Pound. The hard, sculptured feel to these quatrain poems was the result of Pound's influence: this precise and controlled kind of poetic form was something which Pound thought Eliot could work with to good effect.

In summary, the poem is an extended comparison between the hippopotamus and the Christian church, both 'weighty' things, albeit in very different ways, one literal and the other theological. This argument, presented in polished quatrains rhyming abab, is offered in plain terms but we must not take it at face value. For, whilst the majority of the poem weighs up the hippo and the Church, with the church coming out on top, ultimately it is the hippo that ascends to heaven – despite its considerable bulk – while the Church remains on earth, apparently unworthy of a place in heaven after all.

Why? Because the Church is corrupt and out for its own ends, while the hippopotamus is innocent of such corruption. The hippo may be associated with laziness, lying in the mud all day; but it has a simple existence, trying to feed itself when it isn't asleep. By contrast, Eliot tells us, the Church can sleep and feed itself at the same time. This is offered, on the face of it, as a virtue, but it is ironic – because others donate food and wealth to the Church, the implication is that the Church has done nothing to deserve such donations, and gives nothing back. The Hippopotamus TS Eliot hippopotamus cannot reach the mango up on the mangotree, but the Church can dine on exotic fruits from overseas because of its vast imperial power and its colonisation of other lands. This is presented as an argument in favour of the awesome might of the Church, but it leaves us feeling sorry for the hippo, and viewing the Church as rather greedy and exploitative.

Every one of T. S. Eliot's polished quatrains has the same double-edged meaning, which is reminiscent of the speech from Mark Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which ostensibly praises Brutus as an 'honourable man', but subtly and cleverly undermines this by drawing attention to the fact that the things Brutus has done, which the Roman people perceive as honourable, are actually anything but. Eliot's 'argument' in 'The Hippopotamus', similarly, is deliberately offered to us as specious and flawed: the hippopotamus may be 'merely' flesh and blood, in contrast with the Church which was 'based upon a rock', but this line itself reveals the speciousness of the argument being offered. It's an allusion to Jesus' words from the Gospel of Matthew: 'And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (16:18). The 'rock' on which the Church was founded was, in fact, a pun on the name of Peter – very much a man of flesh and blood.

At the end of the poem, the hippopotamus ascends to heaven while the Church remains here on earth – engulfed by the very same 'miasmal mist' that the hippo formerly sat beneath. Yet Eliot's excessively comical images – of the hippo playing the harp, for instance – render the conceit ridiculous, bordering on the surreal. Any analysis of this poem must address this comicality: does it render Eliot's 'argument' frivolous? Or does it underscore the extent to which the heavy, cumbersome hippo is still nevertheless more likely to be lifted up to heaven than the corrupt, grasping church?

Democracy by Langston Hughes

'Democracy' was published in 1949 and is focused on the fight for equal rights under the law including the ability to vote for African Americans. The diction and syntax in this poem are quite simple and easy to understand. This makes sense as the poem was meant to appeal to everyone and anyone, from any time or any place. All the lines in this poem are easy to understand but, the speaker is asking the reader to do more than understand. They should hear, feel, and support what the speaker is saying and join in with his argument that democracy and freedom are human rights.

Summary of *Democracy*

'Democracy' by Langston Hughes is a direct and powerful poem that asks the reader to reassess their ideas about freedom and democracy. In the short lines of this poem, the speaker

makes the argument that they deserve to be free and “stand” on the “land” as much as “you” do. They have thus far been denied equal rights but it’s time for things to change. Incremental change, he adds, or the promise of change in the future is not enough. He and all those in the Black community (or anyone who has been disenfranchised for that matter) want and deserve the same rights as those in power.

Themes in *Democracy*

Throughout ‘*Democracy*’ Hughes explores themes of equal rights, freedom, and change. He is advocating for all three of these things while at the same time asking the reader to consider why he has to work for them at all. Equal rights for all should mean equal rights for all. He is speaking for any minority whose rights under the law have been stomped out or suppressed all over the world, but specifically in America.

Structure of *Democracy*

‘*Democracy*’ by Langston Hughes is a five stanza poem that is separated into uneven sets of lines. The first and fourth stanzas have four lines (making them quatrains), the second and third have five (they’re quintains) and the final stanza has only three lines (making it a tercet). The poem is written in free-verse but there are some examples of rhyme within it. For instance, “fear” and “year” in stanza one and “stand” and “land” in stanza two. These rhymes are used to emphasize certain lines and make sure the reader is paying close attention to how the lines work together.

Literary Devices

Hughes makes use of several literary devices in ‘*Democracy*’. These include but are not limited to metaphor, alliteration, and enjambment. The first of these, metaphor, is seen twice in this short poem. The first example is in stanza three when the poet talks about “tomorrow’s bread” and then at the end of the poem when he compares freedom to a “strong seed”. Enjambment is seen throughout the poem, almost every line is enjambed. Take for example the transition between lines one and two of the first stanza as well as that between lines two and three of stanza four.

Alliteration is another common technique. It is used to help increase the rhyme and rhythm of a poem. This is especially important for the musical quality of verses, a fact that benefited Bob Marley’s version of this poem/song. For example, “strong seed” in stanza four and “fellow” and “feet” in stanza two.

Analysis of *Democracy*

Stanza One

Democracy will not come

(...)

Through compromise and fear.

In the first stanza of ‘*Democracy*,’ the speaker begins with a simple statement. He tells the reader, over the four lines of this stanza, that democracy is not going to be realized through “compromise” or through “fear”. The masses will not be silenced into compliance through

persuasion, freedom is not gained through incremental changes but through a complete overhaul of the system that has sought to disenfranchise Black voters at every turn. The use of enjambment in these lines makes the whole poem flow quite easily and smoothly. The arguments that Hughes puts forward are common sense. Anyone who has any empathy at all should be able to understand them.

Stanza Two

I have as much right (...)
And own the land.

The second stanza is one of the two five-line stanzas in this poem. In it, he continues to use enjambment to make his case for democracy. The speaker states that he, as a Black man in America, has just as much right to “stand / On [his] own two feet” as anyone else. He should be able to “own the land” he lives on or works on and then be able to vote and act in his own interests. The use of rhyme in these lines makes perfect sense. There are examples of half-rhyme, but there are also full rhymes. In this stanza the words “stand” and “land” rhyme. This adds a certain solidness to the statement, lining up nicely with the equal power under a law that the speaker is looking for.

Stanza Three

I tire so of hearing people say,
(...)
I cannot live on tomorrow’s bread.

The third stanza expresses the speaker’s irritation and exhaustion with the arguments that put off equal rights for years and years. Some say that things should be allowed to “take their course” and that eventually, it will all work out. Hughes doesn’t feel the same way. He can’t live on the hopes of tomorrow. He uses a metaphor to describe that hope as food that he can’t access when he’s starving. Freedom 10, 20, or 100 years in the future does nothing for him today.

Stanza Four

Freedom (...)
In a great need.

The fourth stanza of ‘*Democracy*’ is four lines long, and two of these lines are single words. Freedom, he says (using another metaphor), is a “strong seed” that’s planted “In a great need”. The Black community was, and unfortunately still is, in need of protection that the groups take for granted in the United States and around the world.

By using the seed as a metaphor for freedom, this speaker is saying that it will grow steadily and then flourish. Freedom will allow his community to blossom in strength and then benefit the larger American community and the world community.

Stanza Five

I live here, too.

(...)

Just as you.

The fifth stanza of 'Democracy,' also contains one of the very effective, perfect endrhymes. The words "too" and "you" drive the point home that the speaker is just like "you," the listener. He deserves to "live here" and have freedom "just as you" experience it.

If You Forget Me by Pablo Neruda

'If You Forget Me' speaks directly to the author's lover, warning her what will happen if she falls out of love with the speaker. Pablo Neruda's poem 'If You Forget Me' is a poem that speaks directly to the author's lover, warning her what will happen if she falls out of love with the speaker. While Neruda was married to Argentinian writer Delia del Carril at the time the poem was written, many believe Neruda wrote this to his lover, Matilde Urrutia, the woman who would later become his wife. Neruda, a Communist senator in Chile, was exiled from his

native land for thirteen months after the fall of Communism in 1948, and this poem was most likely written while Neruda was in exile. Other critics believe this poem was written not to his lover, but to his homeland of Chile, warning her not to forget him while he is forced away. Regardless of the interpretation, the poem is one of the most popular love poems in literature, and Neruda is often called one of the greatest poets in the twentieth century; he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971.

Summary

This is a poem, which you can read in full [here](#), written by Pablo Neruda, presumably the speaker of the work, to his lover, warning her of what will happen if she forgets him while he is away. In the beginning of the poem, Neruda presents a loving and romantic picture for his lover, reminding her of how much he loves her. However, towards the middle of the poem, his tone changes, warning her that if she stops loving him, he will also cease to love her. The tone in the last stanza of the poem reverts back to the positive, romantic tone in the first section of the poem, and the speaker tells his lover that if she does not forget him, if she keeps on loving him, he will forever love her in return. The poem highlights how intense, yet fickle, a love between a man and woman can be.

Analysis of If You Forget Me

'If You Forget Me' is a poem comprised of six stanzas of varying length. The poem is written in free verse, as the lines are unrhymed.

Biography of Pablo Neruda

Something interesting to note is the fact that the first stanza, which is only one line, reading, "I want you to know one thing," seems to be a continuation of the title. Therefore, it can be read as a single thought: "If you forget me, I want you to know one thing." Reading the poem like this lends a threatening tone to the work. The tone swiftly changes in the second stanza, where Neruda explains the depth of his love directly to his mistress, writing in the first line, "You know how this is." Neruda's diction is quite beautiful in this stanza, referring to the "crystal moon" and "red branch" in line 5. He conjures up his senses of sight and touch, telling his lover that whatever he sees or touches will inevitably carry him back to her.

While the first half of the poem is incredibly romantic and flattering, the third and fourth stanzas paint a very different picture, and they serve as a warning to Neruda's mistress. The third stanza stands on its own, cautioning Neruda's lover that if she stops loving him, he will do the same in return. It also begins the first in a string of ultimatums Neruda offers to his lover.

The fourth stanza continues that thought, as the speaker tells his lover that if he is forgotten, she will be forgotten, too. In order to emphasize this even more, Neruda only includes that one thought into the stanza. It is interesting to note Neruda's diction in that last line—"I shall already have forgotten you." He tells his lover that if she suddenly forgets him, he wants her to know that he was the one who forgot first—it has already been done. It seems important to him that she knows it is she who was forgotten first.

He continues his warning into the fifth stanza, again telling his lover that should she

“decide to leave me at the shore,” he will “on that day, at that hour...seek another land.” In this stanza, Neruda uses an extended metaphor of a shore and its land to warn his lover of the consequences of her actions. The speaker views his lover as his home, but should she decide to leave him, he will have no problem at all seeking another woman to fill her place.

In the sixth and final stanza of ‘If You Forget Me’, however, Neruda changes his tone once again, this time returning to the romantic and passionate tone of the first stanza. The first line of the last stanza is comprised of a single word: “But.” This gives the reader the impression that all that has been occurring in the previous stanzas has been setting the stage for this final one. It is as if the speaker is telling his lover, “If you do any of these things, I will do them back to you, but if you do not, this will happen instead,” for the remaining lines of the final stanza reveal what will happen if the lover does not forget him. If, instead, she feels “...that you are destined for me,” the feeling will be returned.

In the last stanza, Neruda compares his love for his mistress to a fire: it feeds off of the love his mistress has for him, and therefore, it can only be extinguished if her love dies. The speaker closes by vowing that as long as his mistress lives, the love they share for each other will be cradled between them, in their arms.

Historical Context

A devoted Communist, Pablo Neruda extolled the accomplishments of Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union. In 1945, he was elected to serve as a senator in his native Chile, and in 1946, he became the campaign manager for Gabriel González Videla, a man who turned against the Communist party once he was elected to office. Tensions heightened, and in 1948, Neruda and his wife fled Chile in fear. For over a year, the couple hid in the homes of friends and supporters. It was during this exile that Neruda would meet his muse and future wife, Matilde Urrutia, for whom this poem is said to be written. While hiding in Mexico, Neruda wrote *Los Versos Del Capitan*, which featured ‘If You Forget Me’. Neruda finally returned to Chile in 1952, and in 1970, he a candidate for the Chilean presidency, which he eventually gave up. The following year, he won the Nobel Prize, even though some on the committee did not want to give the award to a Communist. Neruda died in 1973 of heart failure, but since his death, many speculate, even today, that he was murdered. Love is a common theme in many of Neruda’s poems, and critics believe there is a duality in the love expressed in his poems: they can be seen to be addressed to his lover, but also to his other mistress, his country.

Phenomenal Woman

Phenomenal Woman' appeared in Maya Angelou's third volume of poetry, *And Still I Rise*. It was first published in 1978. In this poem, she celebrates her body and the bodies, and positive characteristics of all women. Angelou, who died at the age of 86 in 2014, is one of the most celebrated poets and memoirists in American literature. Her first memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was the first U.S. bestseller ever written by an African American woman. It catapulted Angelou into instant fame in the literary world. The majority of her work deals with racism and sexism she experienced as an African American woman.

Summary

The first-person speaker of the poem 'Phenomenal Woman,' presumably Maya Angelou, describes the allure she has and celebrates her identity as a woman.

Throughout each stanza, the speaker exposes the attributes she possesses that deem her irresistible to others, particularly to those of the opposite sex, despite the fact that she does not fit into society's definition of what makes a woman beautiful.

The first stanza includes the physical traits that make her stand out, from her hips to her smile. As the poem continues, she extols the inner mystery that makes her so attractive to the men around her. At the end of the piece, she describes the confidence and pride she has in herself, which radiates from her. In essence, this is Angelou's anthem about her pride in being a woman.

Meaning

Angelou's constant use of the word "phenomenal" is twofold. One most often defines the word as meaning extraordinary and impressive, and she is certainly revelling in being an extraordinary and impressive woman; however, the word phenomenal is also synonymous with unbelievable. By consciously choosing to call herself phenomenal, the speaker seems almost incredulous that she is lucky enough to be a woman. That's why she says in the last four lines of the poem:

'Cause I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

Structure

Structurally, Angelou breaks her poem into four major stanzas, with a smaller yet still significant stanza in between. So, there are a total of five stanzas. While there is some evidence of rhyme, she mostly uses an unconventional rhyme scheme. She begins her poem with a couplet in the first two lines: "Pretty women wonder where my secret lies./ I'm not

cute or built to suit a fashion model's size". While her use of rhyme is sporadic, she does, however, repeatedly end her lines with words that end in "s." This adds to the sultry, sensual tone of the poem, particularly when it is read aloud.

Literary Devices

Throughout this poem, the poet makes use of several literary devices. These include but are not limited to:

Repetition: Angelou ends the majority of her stanzas with "That's me." In addition, the phrase "phenomenal woman" is repeated throughout the course of the poem, once again emphasizing Angelou's unconventional beauty and appeal to the opposite sex.

Enjambment: seen in the transition between lines ten and eleven of the first stanza as well as lines one and two of the second stanza.

Alliteration: examples include "women wonder" in line one of stanza one and "fellows" and "fall" in lines four and five of the second stanza.

Imagery: examples include "The stride of my step, / The curl of my lips" and "Then they swarm around me, / A hive of honey bees."

Themes

Angelou's 'Phenomenal Woman' taps on the themes of womanhood, identity, pride, self-love, and self-acceptance. The main theme, womanhood, is celebrated throughout the poem. The line, "I'm a woman" propagates her self-confidence in being a woman. She celebrates not only her bodily beauty but also her inner glow. Another important theme, identity, is explored from the perspective of gender. She does not talk about her racial identity. Rather her voice expresses her pride for being an attractive woman, not physically but mentally.

The themes of self-love and self-acceptance are there in this work. In the last stanza, the speaker says that her head is unbowed as she accepts how she is. She is happy with it and takes pride in the way her body radiates her inner beauty.

Detailed Analysis

Stanza One

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.

(...)

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

In the first stanza, Angelou's speaker bluntly tells her reader that other women wonder what she has that they are missing, even though she lacks the traits that society most often judges to be beautiful; she intuitively feels that the other women are jealous of her. She writes, "They think I'm telling lies." The speaker continues on, telling the reader her appeal lies in her arms, hips, and lips. Her voice reflects a sense of confidence. She does not hesitate to talk about the span of her hips or the stride of her steps. Her body is unique, and she is satisfied with how she is. Besides, she doesn't care about the so-called "fashion." She is confident that it's in the reach of her arms. The last four lines of this stanza are repeated in the following stanzas with slight variations. These lines act as a refrain that expresses the speaker's inner happiness for being a "phenomenal woman."

Stanza Two

I walk into a room

(...)

Phenomenally.

In her second stanza, she moves away from discussing women and begins to discuss the spell she seems to have over the men she encounters. Her attractiveness goes beyond the physical: it is something innate inside her that makes her so irresistible to men. While women can change the way they look, Angelou insinuates that they will never be able to replicate what she naturally possesses inside herself.

Stanza Three

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

The third stanza contains only two lines. These lines are a part of the refrain. Separating these lines in this stanza, Angelou tries to emphasize the idea. Besides, she uses this scheme to give special stress to the words. It enhances the confident mood of the poem. As readers can see, these lines need special emphasis. The repetition of the same idea also expounds on how she feels when men hover around her like honeybees. She feels confident by thinking about men's reactions and celebrates her phenomenal beauty.

Stanza Four

Men themselves have wondered

(...)

That's me.

This idea continues into the fourth stanza, where the speaker discusses the fact that even men cannot pinpoint what it is about her that is so irresistible. Her answer to them is that she's a woman. She is saying, "Unbelievably, I'm a woman. I'm an extraordinary, amazing woman. That's who I am."

Readers can find a metaphor in this stanza. It is present in the phrase "inner mystery." The "mystery" is nothing but the speaker's self-confidence. Besides, the "sun of my smile" contains another metaphor. Here Angelou implicitly compares her smile to sunshine. The "sun" is also a symbol of energy as well as self-sufficiency. So, her smile is energetic, like the sunlight.

Stanza Five

Now you understand

(...)

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

In the last lines of the poem, Angelou speaks directly to her reader after explaining her appeal to her audience. She explains that she does not need to draw attention to herself; the attention is naturally given to her because she is a woman. Her last line, set apart in its own stanza, simply says, "That's me." Because she is a woman—a phenomenal woman—she has the confidence and pride to walk with her head held high.

Historical Context

'Phenomenal Woman' was first published in Maya Angelou's collection "And Still I Rise" (1978). Later it was published in her book of poetry "Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women" in 1995, along with Maya Angelou's most popular poems such as 'Still I Rise' and 'Our Grandmothers.'

This poem was previously published in *Cosmopolitan* magazine along with her 'Just For a Time' in 1978. The 1993 American romantic drama film *Poetic Justice*, it was also featured. After its initial appearance, it got a favorable response from the critics as well as the audience. Angelou often performed 'Phenomenal Woman', which has been called her "personal theme-poem." Literary critic Harold Bloom considers it a "hymn-like poem to woman's beauty."

In an interview, Angelou said that the poem was for all women. She added, “Now, I know men are phenomenal, but they have to write their own poem.”

Mirror by Sylvia Plath

‘The Mirror’ by Sylvia Plath is an unforgettable poem told from the perspective of a mirror. The mirror gives an autobiographical account of itself. This poem claims that though certain images reflected in it might be painful to certain people at certain stages of their lives, it is in no way responsible for causing this pain because it reflects exactly what it sees. ‘Mirror’ is a reflection of the mirror’s point of view.

Mirror Analysis

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

(...)

I am not cruel, only truthful—

In the poem, Mirror, by Sylvia Plath, which can be read in full here, the mirror gives its own description and says that I am silver colored and I am very accurate while reflecting the images of the objects that fall on my surface. I don’t have any preconceived notions and I absorb everything that comes my way. The image is clear and exact as it is neither distorted nor beautified by my likes and dislikes. It is not out of cruelty but truthfulness that I reflect exactly what I see without any intention of hurting anybody.

In this extract, the mirror is described as an ‘exact’ because it shows and reflects whatever it sees in all its exactness. It does not hide, tone down, twist or distort what it sees as the human beings do. When the poet says, “I have no preconceptions,” she means that the mirror is absolutely unbiased. It reflects exactly what it sees without adding or subtracting. It neither has any likes or dislikes. Hence its reflection is totally dependable. Besides, in the same stanza, the mirror has also been described as ‘unmisted’ because it is ‘clear’, ‘objective’, ‘dispassionate’, and ‘unprejudiced’ in reflecting what it sees. Its view is not obscured by any ‘mist’ of preconceptions and prejudices.

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

(...)

I think it is a part of my heart.

Like an omniscient God, I get a multi-directional view of whatever I get to see. Most of the time I get to focus my attention on the opposite wall that is pink in color and has many discolored patches on its surface. I have been looking at it for such a long time that now it has become a part of my very existence. It is to be noted that the literal meaning of the expression 'four-cornered' is rectangular and it has four corners, and its metaphorical meaning is that it can see everything in this world.

The four corners include the entire world. Like God, it watches us fairly without any bias from all four angles. When the poet says: 'meditate on the opposite wall,' he means that the mirror keeps looking at the wall in a steady gaze even as the mediators do while they meditate and reflect upon God, whereas the phrase 'It is pink, with speckles' refers to the pink wall, with the passage of time has got discolored here and there.

But it flickers.

Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

In this extract, the poet through mirror says, however, my steady view is interrupted many times. Darkness and individuals standing between me and wall block my view and we are separated from each other whenever such an interruption occurs. 'Us' in the above extract refers to the mirror and the wall opposite it, while 'It' in the very first line of this extract refers to the image of the wall.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

(...)

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

The mirror in this extract of the poem imagines itself to be a lake and says that it finds a woman looking into me very closely. Delving deep down into my depths she seems to be searching for her beauty and youth that time has robbed her of. She is not able to reconcile to her lack-luster looks. Hence, she catches a glimpse of herself in the dim candlelight and moonlight. Their projection of hers is not exactly as all blemishes of her face get hidden due to lack of light. In the first line of this extract, the mirror is compared to a lake. Both the objects have the quality of reflecting the image of what appears before them. Just as whatever falls on the surface of the lake is drowned in it, the mirror also swallows whatever falls on its surface. Thus, the comparison is an apt one.

Through the above lines, the woman is searching for her lost youth and beauty. She is also having a close look at her face to gauge the damage that time has done. She is not satisfied with what she observes. She is anxious about signs of age, that is, speckles and wrinkles appearing on her face. Knowing fully well that moon and candles would not reflect her with all truthfulness, she turns to them to get (though false) a mental satisfaction that age was not catching up with her.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

In this extract, the woman once again examines herself in front of the mirror for reassurance. However to her disappointment 'I' faithfully reflect her tarnished looks which upset her. Tears well up in her eyes and she is left wringing her hands. The woman starts crying because she has become very old. So she is trembling or shaking. Also maybe she is fretting and fuming at the loss of her youth and beauty. This reveals her to be a woman of a weak and vain character whose life becomes miserable because she cannot accept the reality.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

(...)

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Despite being disappointed at the sight of her aging reflection, she cannot give up. I still hold a significant place and she keeps coming back to me again and again. She starts her morning by looking at her reflection in me. She feels that her beauty and youth have been swallowed by me. Now her old and wrinkled face emerges. The loss of her youth and beauty makes her behave like a fish out of water, which rather than looking elegant and graceful looked, horrid.

The mirror is very important to the woman because she has 'seen' herself in the mirror from her girlhood days to her old age. The mirror has always recorded and reflected all the changes in her. It is her companion and confidant. It shows her true self to her. She is used to looking at herself in the mirror. She has been fond of admiring her youth and beauty as reflected by the mirror. But now she does not like wrinkled and aged face. She regrets the loss of her youth. It is to be noted that 'the young girl' and 'the old woman' are the same people. Looking at herself in the mirror, the old woman travels down the memory lane right up to her childhood days. That youth has now disappeared forever.

The use of the phrase 'terrible fish' in the last line describes the hog-like and wrinkled face of the old woman. The loss of her youth and beauty makes her behave like a fish trapped in the pond of time which looks terrible without any grace or elegance. 'The Mirror' by Sylvia Plath is an unforgettable poem told from the perspective of a mirror. The mirror gives an autobiographical account of itself. This poem claims that though certain images reflected in it might be painful to certain people at certain stages of their lives, it is in no way responsible for causing this pain because it reflects exactly what it sees. 'Mirror' is a reflection of the mirror's point of view.

A Pastoral by Agha Shahid Ali

'A Pastoral' by Agha Shahid Ali is a moving poem. In it, the poet reflects his love for Kashmir and his affection for his motherland. The Kashmiri-American Diasporic poet was born in Delhi, but brought up in Kashmir, and later on, shifted as well as settled in America. While in Kashmir Ali saw the bloody massacre of innocent people and felt the pangs of separation from his fellow Kashmiri friends who had to leave their motherland due to the chaotic condition rampant there. It was the deteriorating sociopolitical condition of Kashmir that let him pen down the poems of loss and longing. Wherever the poet has been he has always wished for peace to prevail in Kashmir, a land that has often been threatened by violence

A Pastoral

Though most of Agha Shahid's poetic works orbit around Kashmir and its worsening conditions, through his poem, A Pastoral, he brought forth the motherly love of a Kashmiri towards his/her motherland. This poem not only reflects his love for Kashmir and its people, but he also shows his deep love towards his mother. In the poem, he has been shown missing his lost and migrated friends, and in the very first line of the poem he says, "We shall meet again, in Srinagar, by the gates of the Villa of Peace." Being a resident of Kashmir for long, Ali had witnessed the devastating socio-political condition of Kashmir and always wished that the day will come when the peace will be upon it, and its dwellers will take a sigh of relief from ongoing violence and massacre of the innocent people.

Ali has dedicated A Pastoral poem to his friend "Suvir Kaul" who had spent much time with him. But the separation of his friend and his other childhood friends shattered Ali intensely and internally and led him to pour out his pangs through a poem called A Pastoral. In the poem, the poet has also brought into light the migration of Kashmiri pundits and his Muslim friends. The poem A Pastoral is ironically titled to invoke the stark desolation of a place that boasts of an admiring tradition, thanks to its everlasting beauty. When the poem starts it shows how

hopeful the poet is about the peaceful future of Kashmir. The poet sends an invitation to his friends, try to convince that yes, they will come again and meet in Srinagar when “our hands will blossom into fists till the soldiers return the keys and disappear”.

Style, Themes & Imagery

Agha Shahid Ali is well-known to write poetry in both traditional forms and free verse, experimenting with verse forms, like the canzone and sestina. While almost all of his writing and poetic works were immensely influenced by the Persian-Urdu tradition, yet he chose to pen down his poetic work in English language, in place of Urdu. His is ghazalesque style, using which he blends the forms and rhythms of the Indo-Islamic tradition with a distinctly American approach to storytelling. A large number of his poems don't abstractly consider the love and longings, but they concretely detail about the events that are fully personal, and sometimes even political. Since the poet also had interest in geography, so he mixed the landscapes of America with those of his native Kashmir. His work blends the American and Kashmiri landscapes with the clashed and conflicted emotions of immigration, exile, while in his subsequent works, his poetic works have been around loss, illness and mortality. But remember, the credit to introduce and popularize Ghazal form in American poetry definitely goes to Agha Shahid Ali.

Detailed Analysis

Ali uses elegant, reflective and lyrical voice, which gets augmented by the repetition of words, half-rhymes, and culturally specific imagery. As you go through the complicated terrain of his poems, you come to know the intricacy of his language and thoughts.

Stanza 1

We shall meet again, in Srinagar,
(...)
our last world, the first that vanished

Right from the very first stanza of this poem, which can be read in full here, it becomes evident that how much love the poet has towards Kashmir, and Srinagar, where he promises to meet again his friend or friends who were compelled to migrate due to continuous violence in Kashmir, or who lost their lives during any violence or massacre in Kashmir. He says, comes what may, we will meet again and get united, we shall again get into the world that got barren without our presence. He sees hope of peace and prosperity and wishes today's Kashmir will be completely different from the future Kashmir. Here, “by the gates of the Villa of Peace” symbolizes that the peace will prevail, and we shall meet again. We shall fight till soldiers surrender and leave us to live in peace.

Stanzas 2-3 in our absence from
the broken city. We'll tear our shirts
for tourniquets

(...)
in the massacre, when the Call to Prayer
opened the floodgates”—Quick, follow the silence—

Agha Shahid Ali has kept many of his poems around Srinagar. Through these poems, the poet has praised the city, mourned it, longed for it and even remembered its nostalgia. Most of the time, he even synonymizes Srinagar with Kashmir, and words used for the city even grieves for its sad state. He knows under what turmoil the city has gone through, and is even today going through, but he also knows that how resilient Srinagar has been.

Expressing the same feel, in the second stanza, the poet says that, we shall meet again, in Srinagar, and fight for the revival of Kashmir. We are ready to bear everything to help it gain its glorious past. The fundamental rights of human beings will be restored and reinstated. The rampant sadness will not live for long, it will some or other day be restored with the independence of the Kashmiri people. The city may be sad today, but we will challenge the sadness, negotiate it, and resist it. We will continue to do so as our elders or ancestors have been doing it for long. Through our struggle, we will be able to succeed in paving peaceful ways for our future generations. I know Srinagar remains alive when it is sad, I know the city can survive even during tough time, and I know the city will be so unless it gets freedom. Yes, the day will come when we will turn ivy into roses, the day will come when we would hear the gardener's voice, play as we used to in our childhood. The day is not far when the peace will prevail, and our future generation will live as peacefully as ever.

Through the poem, A Pastoral, he has introduced several themes. He has portrayed the city's sad state and the fighting spirit of its people who never gave up. The poet also portrays the natural beauty spread in the city that also sends the message of fighting till independence, and the role of its elders and ancestors who sacrificed their lives for its revival and prosperity. Moreover, the use of words like tourniquets, thorns, ivy, roses and pomegranate, all indicate the fighting spirit of the people living in Kashmir.

Stanzas 4-5

“and dawn rushed into everyone's eyes.”

Will we follow the horned lark, pry

(...)

rip open, in mid-air, the blue magpie, then
carry it, limp from the talons.”

In these stanzas, the poet asks should we follow the horned lark; search the cemetery, the dust still lying uneasy on the graves that were built in hurry without any names. He further says, “Yes, we will surely hear our gardener's voice again, but for that, we will have to struggle. Just as the bird remains silent in winter, and comes back in spring, we too shall have to tighten our belts and restart the fight to gain independence from the violence that has snatched our peace and left us in the fetters of massacres and violence. So, the gardener will come again with his voice, and we shall again chirp like birds among the trees, but to achieve all that we shall have to struggle, struggle and struggle.

Stanzas 6-7

Pluck the blood: My words will echo thus at
sunset, by the ivy, but to what purpose?

(...) scripts: “See how your world has cracked.
Why aren’t you here? Where are you? Come back.

In these stanzas, the poet says that when we will step into our old place or territory, we will find the letters that mailman might have left for us. The latter knew that we would definitely return them. It would be better if the postman speeded those letters to death. He further asks why you are not here, where have you gone, and plead him to come back so that we can relive our old days, and breathe free. As we know Ali’s poem, “The Country Without a Post Office (1997)” gained him a lot of recognition and appreciation. And the same scene of mailman the poet has used and described in, “A Pastoral”, whereby the poet wants to show the importance of post offices and postmen.

Stanzas 8-9

Is history deaf there, across the oceans?” Quick,
the bird will say. And we’ll try

(...)

will say) that to which we belong, not like this— to
get news of our death after the world’s.

In the last two stanzas, the poet curses the history, and asks are you deaf to our concerns and the pitiable condition of Kashmir and Kashmiris. Don’t you see the atrocities the Kashmiris are facing for years, don’t you see why they are compelled to leave their motherland. If no one comes to our help, we will ourselves make use of the keys; open the door of our drawing-room. As we move ahead, we thought would be engulfed by the dust that has textiled the entire home, and its every possible corners and articles, such as mirror, table, and all. But we will surely light oil lamps; we will definitely go past our elders and ancestors, and hold their wills close to our heart, following what they have been directing us for years. We will surely fulfill their wish and return our home for always. In all, we will revive our Kashmir, and fight till it achieves its goal, and will pave violence-free and peaceful ways for our future generations.

Personal Commentary

Agha Shahid Ali dedicated his poem A Pastoral to one of his Kashmiri Hindu friends, named Suvir Kaul. This is a poem of hope and exuberant future that the poet expects to prevail in Kashmir. However, in view of the condition of today’s and then Kashmir, this has just been a hope, and no concrete solution has been brought about so far. The situations have been getting worst day by day. The state has become a source to take political mileage, and no government seems to be seriously interested in having peace and brotherhood between the two communities – Hindus and Muslims. However, the poet of the poem hopefully says, “We shall meet again, in Srinagar, by the gates of the Villa of Peace.”