

Literary Criticism

Student Activity Conference

Fall 2018

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Explicating Poetry

Once by the Pacific

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before. 4
The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff, 8
The cliff in being backed by continent;
It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage. 12
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God's last Put out the light was spoken.

Robert Frost

Returning

She re-enters her life
the way a parachutist re-enters
the coarser atmosphere of earth,
exchanging the sensual shapes of clouds
for cloud-shaped trees rushing 5
to meet her, their branches sharp,
their soft leaves transitory.

She notices smells,
the scent of pines piercing
the surface of memory— 10
that dark lake submerged in pines
in which her husband
starts to swim
back into sight.

And as she lands 15
in their own garden,
after her brief but brilliant flight,
she pushes the silky parachute from her
as she pushed the white sheet
from her breasts 20
just yesterday.

Linda Pastan

Rattler, Alert

Slowly he sways that head that cannot hear,
Two-leveled cone of horn the yellow rust,
Polled on the current of his listening fear.
His length is on the tympanum of earth,
And by his tendril tongue's tasting the air 5
He sips, perhaps, a secret of his race
Or feels for the known vibrations, heat, or trace
Of smoother satin than the hillwind's thrust
Through grass: the aspirate of half-held breath,
The crushing of my weight upon the dust, 10
My foamless heart, the bloodleap at my wrist.

Brewster Ghiselin

Aftermath

When the summer fields are mown,
When the birds are fledged and flown,
 And the dry leaves strew the path;
With the falling of the snow, 4
With the cawing of the crow,
Once again the fields we mow
 And gather in the aftermath.

Not the sweet, new grass with flowers 8
Is this harvesting of ours;
 Not the upland clover bloom;
But the rowen mixed with weeds,
Tangled tufts from marsh and meads, 12
Where the poppy drops its seeds
 In the silence and the gloom.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Acquainted with the Night

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane. 4
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry 8
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky 12

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Robert Frost

Étude Réaliste *excerpted*

I

A baby's feet, like sea-shells pink,
Might tempt, should heaven see meet,
An angel's lips to kiss, we think, 3
A baby's feet.

Like rose-hued sea-flowers toward the heat
They stretch and spread and wink 6
Their ten soft buds that part and meet.

No flower-bells that expand and shrink
Gleam half so heavenly sweet 9
As shine on life's untrodden brink
A Baby's feet.

II

A baby's hands, like rosebuds furled 12
Whence yet no leaf expands,
Ope if you touch, though close upcurled,
A baby's hands. 15

Then, fast as warriors grip their brands
When battle's bolt is hurled,
They close, clenched hard like tightening bands. 18

No rosebuds yet by dawn impearled
Match, even in loveliest lands,
The sweetest flowers in all the world— 21
A baby's hands.

III

A baby's eyes, ere speech begin,
Ere lips learn words or sighs, 24
Bless all things bright enough to win
A baby's eyes.

Love, while the sweet thing laughs and lies, 27
And sleep flows out and in,
Sees perfect in them Paradise.

Their glance might cast out pain and sin, 30
Their speech make dumb the wise,
By mute glad godhead felt within
A baby's eyes. 33

Algernon Charles Swinburne

The Destruction of Sennacherib *excerpted*

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

George Gordon, Lord Byron

The Author to Her Book

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view, 4
Made thee in ragg, halting to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judg).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call, 8
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could: 12
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.
I stretched thy joynts to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou run'st more hobling then is meet; 16
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save home-spun Cloth, I' th' house I find.
In this array 'mongst Vulgars mayst thou roam.
In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come; 20
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,
If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none:
And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door. 24

Anne Bradstreet

Mutability

From low to high doth dissolution climb,
And sink from high to low, along a scale
Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;
A musical but melancholy chime, 4
Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care.
Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear
The longest date do melt like frosty rime, 8
That in the morning whitened hill and plain
And is no more; drop like the tower sublime
Of yesterday, which royally did wear
His crown of weeds, but could not even sustain 12
Some casual shout that broke the silent air,
Or the unimaginable touch of Time.

William Wordsworth

Sonnet XXXV *excerpted*

No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud,
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.

William Shakespeare

Aftershocks

We are not in the same place after all.
 The only evidence of the disaster,
 Mapping across the bedroom wall,
 Tiny cracks still fissuring the plaster— 4
 A new cartography for us to master,
 In whose legend we read where we are bound:
 Terra infirma, a stranger land, and vaster.
 Or have we always stood on shaky ground? 8
 The moment keeps on happening: a sound.
 The floor beneath us swings, a pendulum
 That clocks the heart, the heart so tightly wound,
 We fall mute, as when two lovers come 12
 To the brink of the apology, and halt,
 Each standing on the wrong side of the fault.

A. E. Stallings

London, 1802

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower, 4
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
 Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
 And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power. 8
 Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way, 12
 In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

William Wordsworth

Non-exhaustive Listing of Literary Concepts Addressed during This Explication Session

alliteration	formula / formulaic	metonymy	simile
allusion	heroic couplet	octave	sonnet
analogy	homonym / homograph	onomatopoeia	Anglo-Norman
anaphora	heteromeric (mosaic) rhyme	pathetic fallacy	caudate
anthropomorphism	imagery	personification	curtal
apostrophe	inversion (hyperbaton, anastrophe)	persona	Miltoic
assonance	irony	quatrain	Petrarchan (Italian)
chiasmus	kenning	refrain	Shakespearean (English)
connotations	liminality	reification	Spenserian
consonance	litotes	rhetorical question	sigmatism
controlling image	metaphor	rhyme scheme	speaker
couplet	metrical feet	feminine rhyme	stanza
denotation	anapest	masculine rhyme	synaesthesia
diction	dactyl	true rhyme	synecdoche
elision (syncope)	iamb	rhythm (metrical pattern)	<i>terza rima</i>
end stop	pyrrhic	roundel	tone
enjambment	spondee	run-on	volta
envelope stanza	trochee	sestet	zeugma