A Guiding Model Answer for
Victorian and Modern Poetry

Fourth Grade

January 9 (Year 2011)

Faculty of Education

Prepared by

Mohammad Al-Hussini Mansour Arab, Ph.D.

University of Nevada, Reno (USA)
Victoria and Modern Poetry

Respond to the following questions:

Part I

Respond to only three of the following questions:

(Note: Time for each question is 20 minutes)

1. In "Meeting at Night," Robert Browning's use of a traditional yet somewhat irregular meter, rhyme scheme, imagery and figurative language seem appropriate in conveying the speaker's situation and attitude. Explicate?

2. Trace the ironic mode in Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess"?

3. "Musée des Beaux Arts" takes the painting of the Fall of Icarus as a background to portray W. H. Auden's vision of the Fall of Man in the modern world? Discuss?

4. In what ways are the images of bird and song used throughout William Butler Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium"? Explicate?

5. Discuss the relationship between form and imagery in Sylvia Plath's poem "Mirror"?

Part II

Respond to the two following questions: (Note: Time for each question is 30 minutes)


2. The literary and the visual arts are very similar. Each strives to capture a moment, tell a story or pin down something that would otherwise be lost in the flow of time. Ted Hughes's "Perfect Light" works in much the same way as Auden's poem "Musée de Beaux Arts": it is the speaker's reaction to a work of visual art that changes the way the reader looks at and understands the work being described. Explain?

Good Luck

Mohammad Al-Hussini AbuArab
Answers

Part I

Question # One:

In "Meeting at Night," Robert Browning's use of a traditional yet somewhat irregular meter, rhyme scheme, imagery and figurative language seem appropriate in conveying the speaker's situation and attitude. Explicate?

Answer:

Robert Browning's poem "Meeting at Night" is written in iambic tetrameter, but many of the lines include anapestic feet that hurry its pace. Browning's use of a traditional yet somewhat irregular meter seems appropriate for this speaker, who is both in control and in a hurry. Browning uses the rhyme scheme to insert a subtle contradiction of the poem's implicit assertion that love is the speaker's ultimate goal. Each stanza follows the same pattern: abccba. In this rhyme scheme, the last three lines (cba) reverse the sequence of the first three (abc), and the last line rhymes with the first. Thus, while each stanza moves forward toward a goal (the beach, the lover), the rhyme scheme moves backward, signaling that the speaker cannot remain with his lover indefinitely.

As indicated above, Browning also uses imagery and figurative language to convey the speaker's situation and attitude. The poem's opening lines present the bleak and almost colorless setting of the speaker's journey: "grey" sea, "black" land, and a "yellow" half-moon. The poem's tone seems to shift when the speaker personifies the waves, which "leap" to form "fiery ringlets": Suddenly the water is full of motion and color, but only in response to the speaker's actions and preoccupations. The speaker's first use of "I" takes place in the fifth line—"I gain the cove"—as if to reinforce the notion that he is in control of his environment. Browning uses personification not to enhance the role of nature in the poem but to emphasize the speaker's sense of dominance.

In the second part of the poem, Browning's images shift as the speaker reaches land and nears his goal. Although a mile of beach still separates him from his lover, the beach, unlike the bleak and cold water, is "warm" and "sea-scented." As discussed earlier, the imagery from this point on is predominantly aural, with the exception of the "blue spurt" of the match. The flash of light recalls the "fiery" appearance of the waves in the first stanza and strengthens the connection between the waves and the speaker's lover.

At the end of the poem, the speaker uses figurative language again, this time hyperbole, when he claims that the lovers' hearts are louder than a human voice; at the same time he downplays the importance of the "voice" and its "joys and fears" by not telling us whose voice it is (it could be his or his lover's). The speaker's hyperbole attempts to bestow permanence upon the ecstatic moment, in which the heart, emotion, and union take precedence over the head, reason, and separation.
**Question # Two:**
Trace the ironic mode in Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess"?

**Answer:**

Robert Browning's poem “My Last Duchess” is a splendid example of the irony that a poet can achieve within the format of the dramatic monologue, a poetic form in which there is only one speaker. When there is only one speaker, we necessarily have to weigh carefully what he or she is telling us, and we often have to “read between the lines” in keeping an objective perspective on the story or incidents that the speaker describes to us. We can gather from this poem's setting, “Ferrara,” a town in Italy, as well as from the speaker's reference to his “last Duchess,” that the speaker in this poem is the Duke of Ferrara.

First of all, it is evident that the Duke is speaking to someone, and that he is showing his auditor a painting. “That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,” he says, and then explains that the painter, Fra Pandolf, “worked busily a day, and there she stands.” The Duke then describes the usual reaction that people have to viewing this painting—a reaction specifically to the Duchess' “earnest glance.” He says that strangers often turn to him as if to ask “How such a glance came there,” and then tells his auditor, “so, not the first / Are you to turn and ask thus.” But has his auditor actually asked the Duke a question, or is the Duke simply making an assumption, based upon a look on his guest's face, that he is reacting to the painting as every other viewer has reacted to it? If he is jumping to a conclusion in the case of this latest viewer, then how do we know that he is right about other people's reactions to the painting? Perhaps he sees in other people's looks what he wants to see. We will need to remember this possible aspect of the Duke's character as we continue to listen to his story.

Next the Duke elaborates on his last Duchess' glance in the portrait, and calls it a “spot of joy.” But it was not his presence only that caused her to smile in such a way, he says. The painter, Fra Pandolf, may have said anything from the simple “'Her mantle laps / Over my lady's wrist too much,'” to the much more flattering “'Paint / Must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat,'” and the lady's reaction would be this same, blushing “spot of joy.” The Duke then tells us more about his lady's likes. She had a heart “too soon made glad,” he says, and she was too easily pleased by everything she looked on. “Sir, 'twas all one!” he says to his listener, listing the things that pleased her: the Duke's own favor, a beautiful sunset in the west, a bough of ripe cherries from the orchard, a white mule she loved to ride—each of these things she enjoyed to the same degree, and each brought the same blush of pleasure to her cheek.

Finally we get to the heart of the Duke's problem with his former wife. She thanked people who pleased her, which was all well and good in theory, but she thanked them all with equal affection, “as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With
anybody's gift.” The Duke seems to have been offended that she did not single him out among the others who pleased her, and underrated his gift of a well-established name and proud family heritage. She smiled, he says, whenever he passed her, “but who passed without / Much the same smile?” And how did the Duke react to this? “Who'd stoop to blame / This sort of trifling?” he asks his auditor. The whole business is beneath him. Even if he had “skill / In speech,” it would be stooping to address such a situation, and he tells his listener that he indeed does not have skill in speech. This statement is ironic, for the Duke actually seems to be quite a polished speaker, although he may be telling us a great deal about his personality and history that he may not have intended to reveal. So what became of this seemingly kind and happy lady, who evidently enjoyed whatever she experienced? “I gave commands,” the Duke says, “Then all smiles stopped together.” He says for a second time, “There she stands / As if alive,” suggesting that the lady is no more. And yet, strangely, he shows no compunction for his actions.

As we make this discovery about the fate of his last wife, the Duke changes the direction of his speech to his auditor. “Will't please you rise?” he asks, and suggests that they go below to meet other guests, dismissing the difference in his and his guest's ranks by stating generously, “Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir.” The Duke then provides us with a hint as to the identity of his auditor. He speaks to the man of “the Count your master,” and hints that this Count's reputed wealth will surely provide the Duke with an ample dowry, a sum of money given by a bride's father to her new husband. These details indicate, ironically, that the Duke's guest is a messenger from a Count, and that his mission is to arrange a marriage between the Duke and the Count's daughter. At this point, do we believe the Duke when he assures us that it is not the money, but the Count's “fair daughter's self” that is his “object?” Or perhaps it is both, for the word “object” seems to be an important one in making a final assessment of the Duke's character. He is a collector of art objects, after all, and he seems to enjoy showing off his rich collection. After all, the whole occasion of his speech has been an explanation of the origin of a portrait of his former wife. Moreover, on the way out of his art gallery, he takes the time to point out one final art object to his guest: “Notice Neptune, though / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!” Once again the Duke takes the opportunity to show off a piece of art that he is proud of and to drop the name of the artist, hoping to impress his guest. The subject of the sculpture adds to our reaction to the Duke's story; here a powerful god subdues a wild sea-horse, much as the Duke has subdued his former Duchess. And as Claus of Innsbruck has caught this image for him in bronze, he has had Fra Pandolf catch his wife's "spot of joy" in a painting which can handily be hidden behind a curtain, at last giving the Duke complete control over whom his wife smiles at (“since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I”). The final two words seem to say it all in summing up what the Duke values: after all, the sculpture of Neptune was cast “for me!”
Ironically, despite the fact that the Duke simply tells us the story of his first wife and how her portrait came to be painted, he manages to tell us a great deal more about his own personality. We can judge that he is a vain man who is quite proud of his heritage and his “nine-hundred-years-old name,” and that he is quite proud of his art collection. As Neptune tames the sea-horse, he has tamed a former wife, transforming her uncontrollable spirit into an object of art and preserving her loveliness—“as if she were alive”—into a medium over which he can exert complete control. He is no longer subject to the “trifling” situation of her constant smiling, and he can now control whom she smiles at and who is exposed to her beauty. Much of the dramatic irony in the poem, however, lies in the identity of the auditor. The Duke has given all of this information about his personality and the history of his former marriage to an envoy who has been sent to arrange a new marriage. Some critics have even suggested that in this speech made to the man sent to negotiate his second marriage, the Duke is cleverly indicating what kind of behavior he will expect in his new wife. Nevertheless, knowing what we now know about this Duke, who would lead another unsuspecting young girl into such a situation?

Despite his wish to impress us with himself and to detract from his last Duchess’ qualities, Browning’s self-satisfied Duke ironically manages instead to paint her as a gentle and lovely person and himself as somewhat of a monster. He is truly a paradoxical, yet not entirely unappealing, character despite one’s reaction to his morality by the end of the poem. It is hard not to be drawn into his skillful speech, which is carefully designed to impress his guest with his name and possessions and flatter the envoy into representing him favorably with his potential father-in-law. His pride in his painting, his willingness to dwell on the loveliness and virtues of his earlier wife despite his feelings about her, his generosity toward his guest, and his enthusiasm for his collection—stopping to comment on one last object before going down to “collect” one more wife—keep the reader guessing throughout the poem and constantly caught off guard by the revelation of one surprising personality trait after another.

**Question # Three:**

"Musée des Beaux Arts" takes the painting of the Fall of Icarus as a background to portray W. H. Auden's vision of the Fall of Man in the modern world? Discuss?

**Answer:**

Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" contemplates the nature of suffering and transcedence through reference to Pieter Breughel's painting *The Fall of Icarus*, which the poet had perhaps seen on a trip to Brussels. In Greek mythology, Icarus and his father Daedalus had escaped from the labyrinth by crafting wings made of wax. Icarus in his sense of exhilaration at his escape dared to climb higher and higher in the sky until the sun melted his wings and he plunged to his death. Breughel's painting shows the moment when the youth hits the water, his legs barely visible in the remote distance in the right hand corner
of the painting. In the center of the canvas is the ploughman who either does not hear the splash of Icarus' fall over the snort of his plough horse or ignores the event, too involved in his daily affairs to bother about such a miraculous event.

Auden's poem begins by contemplating the nature of suffering, recalling the "Old Masters," presumably those Dutch religious painters who portrayed sacred events in the garb of contemporary Antwerp or Brussels. Many such canvases represented miraculous events from Scripture occurring amidst the hustle and bustle of city streets, a fact which sparks Auden's imagination. Suffering, he speculates, "takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along." He elaborates upon this truth and attempts to mildly shock his readers by his use of vulgar language: "even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course / Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot / Where the dogs go on with their doggy life."

Naturally Auden was keenly aware that the central events in Christ's life were surrounded by the banal and the everyday—he was born in a stable, surrounded by tax collectors and fishermen, and died with Roman soldiers marching underneath the Cross. Part of Auden's intention is to satirize the bourgeois smugness of a Europe on the brink of war—the poem dates from 1938, months before Hitler's troops invaded Poland—but the poem would not capture one's imagination if it had remained simply an attack upon middle-class thick-headedness and insensitivity. Ultimately, the crude language is abandoned in favor of an elegant simplicity, as if affirming paradoxically the simple faith of common folk and the pathos of everyday suffering: "the ploughman may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, / But for him it was not an important failure." Auden's image remains ambiguous, caught between his own revulsion at humanity's blindness to suffering, and his admiration for their strong, stoic endurance of suffering itself.

**Question # Five:**
Discuss the relationship between form and imagery in Sylvia Plath's poem "Mirror"?

**Answer:**

In "Mirror," Sylvia Plath uses the technique of personification to give an inanimate object—in this case a glass mirror—the human capacity for speech. Although it is personified, the mirror claims for itself a kind of nonjudgmental and unemotional character that human beings lack. It announces in the first line of the poem, "I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions." Thus the mirror possesses both human and non-human attributes. It has no hidden motives and it does not delay in reflecting whoever faces it: "Whatever I see I swallow immediately / Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike." The poet plays on the word "unmisted" to show that the mirror's reflection is visually clear to one who looks into it, and also to reiterate that it offers a reflection that is truthful, even if the truth is
painful. The looking-glass is not affected by feelings that might cloud (or "mist") its judgment and compel it to change, for better or for worse, the view it provides.

The mirror not only passively reflects an image but actively sees with "The eye of a little god, four-cornered." Its "eye" differs from a human eye in that it is god-like and square or rectangular. The glass also does not require the presence of a person in order to act. It tells us, "I meditate on the opposite wall" and furthermore that "I have looked at it so long / I think it is a part of my heart." It appears that, for the moment, the mirror is no longer an unfeeling instrument of reflection, but a being with the capacity to "meditate" and one that possesses a vital organ, a heart. However, we should note that behind the word "meditate" is a pun on "reflect." We would ordinarily associate a mirror with the word "reflect" in the sense of a visual phenomenon: a mirror's reflection is something we see with our eyes. In order to have the looking-glass assert that it "meditates" on the opposite wall, the poet subtly calls up the sense of "reflect" as an intellectual activity or mental reflectiveness. A play on words makes it unclear whether or not we are to believe the mirror meditates as a human mind would.

These ambiguous associations between the mirror and human emotions prepares us for the transition to the second section, in which the mirror interacts with a specific person. The poem is divided into two sections, or stanzas, of nine lines each. A line break separates the two stanzas. To reinforce the distinction between them and to signal a new beginning, the second stanza begins with the word "Now." The voice of the mirror announces that "Now I am a lake." The change is important because it creates a metaphor or symbol for the mirror. A lake resembles a mirror in so far as they can both reflect images before them, but there are real differences between these two objects. A lake, unlike a mirror, has depth, and because its material is literally fluid, a lake's reflection is potentially less stable than that of an immobile looking-glass. Also, a body of water, unlike a piece of glass, is penetrable. Furthermore, the reflective surface of a lake lies horizontally, while a mirror, generally speaking, hangs vertically. Finally, a lake is a natural object, while a mirror is not. These distinctions complicate our understanding of what the poet says about the mirror, but the poet emphasizes the similarities rather than differences between a mirror and a lake. By use of a metaphor, she can speak about these two things simultaneously.

The change from one kind of reflector to another parallels an even greater change in tone from one stanza to the next. In contrast with the mirror's precise dispassion in the first stanza, the woman who appears in the second stanza displays a great deal of emotion. When the woman sees her reflection, the mirror ironically states that "She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands." The mirror reports that she acts with intensity, "Searching my reaches for what she really is." The woman is not simply looking into the mirror to check her appearance: she is pursuing more profound information about her basic identity. She is particularly concerned with growing older, studying her face for evidence of aging. Her agitated responses show that, to her, a deteriorating physical appearance takes away
from her sense of self-worth. Given that the woman seeks an affirmation of her fundamental selfhood in her reflection, the mirror understates the case when it declares that "I am important to her."

Though the woman is dissatisfied with what she sees, it is clear that she returns again and again to peer into the mirror. When she turns away from her reflection, the mirror says "I see her back, and reflect it faithfully." She momentarily appeals instead to "those liars, the candles or the moon." The candles and moon are "liars" because the partial light they provide may obscure some of the woman's signs of aging. By contrast, the mirror is fully "truthful" and its view well-lit. Yet, the woman repeatedly approaches the mirror as if its truth might change.

Given the attitude of the woman, it makes sense to imagine the mirror as a lake, since it seems she hopes it holds deeper knowledge than it actually does. The tears that she cries over the mirror also provide the water to fill this "lake." This metaphor allows the poet to offer two rather startling images in the last two lines. The mirror concludes, "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish." The young girl and old woman represent the woman in the poem at different stages of her life. Over the course of her life, she has watched her face change from youth to her present middle age, and she foresees her face as it will be when she is an older woman. The poet's use of the word "drowned" suggests that the woman has not passively observed herself aging, but instead that she is responsible for having killed off a part of herself. Perhaps the woman's concern with aging prevented her from enjoying her youth. Her tears of lament for what she sees in the mirror have "drowned" the person she once was. Those tears are also threatening to submerge her present self and to give way to the "terrible fish" of old age that is steadily nearing the surface.

The lake really stands for a mirror, and we have already proposed that the mirror, in part, stands for poetry. The mirror is "The eye of a little god," just as poetry can provide the privileged view of the poet. This looking-glass is "four-cornered" like the nearly square shape of the poem we see on the page. (We might also say that the poem has two corners in each stanza, one at the top on the left end, and one at the bottom left, for a total of four corners.) The poem is even constructed so that each of the two, nine-line stanzas is a kind of mirror image of the other. We encounter this self-reflection visually, as we see the lines on the page separated into equal parts. Thus, the poem presents itself not only as the voice of a mirror but also as the imaginative shape of a mirror into which we, as readers, peer. Most important, in understanding this mirror, we must take into account both its literal significance and its figurative or metaphorical meanings. Reading a poem requires this same attentiveness.
Part II

Question # One:

Compare and contrast Robinson Jeffers's use of nature in his poem "Hurt Hawks" with Robert Frost's poem "The Woodpile"?

Answer:

"Hurt Hawks" is a nature lyric, and the descriptions are highly evocative of the harshness and beauty of the inhuman world. The brief story about how the speaker, whom Jeffers presents as himself, tends for a wounded hawk and then kills it out of mercy because it can no longer "use the sky forever" is violent, and Jeffers does not soften that violence in any way. If anything, he uses the stark beauty and violence of inhuman nature as the setting for a story that provokes us into thinking about immense and dangerous questions, including nothing less than the relation of any given spirit—a man's or a hawk's, or by extension, any living thing—to the rest of the universe. The poem has a clear, direct, visionary quality that is very much in the spirit of tragic intensity and the sublime, or inexpressible and terrifying. This is the quality that has attracted so many readers to Jeffers's work. So "Hurt Hawks" is an excellent introduction to all that is best in Jeffers: gripping narrative; clear philosophical meditation; spiritual intensity; a tragic view of life; and a sublime vision of nature.

In the case of "Hurt Hawks," Jeffers makes a comparison between an injured animal and the kinds of defeats suffered by human beings, and the language is certainly more direct than that of high Modernists such as Pound and Eliot. Still, Jeffers's metaphors are highly complex. In order to understand that complexity, we need to have a somewhat better sense of what Jeffers meant by "Inhumanism," the name he gave to what he called his "philosophical attitude." As he repeated throughout his life, the beauty of nature—in ocean, rock, hawk, sky, and star—has absolutely no need of human beings.

In Jeffers's view, many of civilization's problems, including the problems that led during his lifetime to two devastating world wars, grew out of a childish insistence considering ourselves to be the center of the universe and always looking inward when we should be looking outward, away from human concerns and toward the wild beauty of all creation. So Jeffers defined Inhumanism as "a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not—man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence."

The poem, which is itself a manmade thing in praise of wild, inhuman nature, becomes a place where the human and the inhuman meet. This is true not only because the human speaker confronts the hawk, but it is true even at the level of the poem's most powerful metaphors, which mix the human and the inhuman, the hawk and the pillar. This observation helps to explain why the poem is called "Hurt Hawks," when there appears to
be only one hawk in it—perhaps the other hawk is the poet himself, and by extension that part in all of us that can somehow understand the "beautiful and wild" world of nature, even though we are human.

Jeffers is quite aware of what he is doing, that his poem is not a scientific description of a wounded animal's death, but a way of provoking us into meditation. At the end of the first part, the poet suddenly turns to his readers to accuse us of not even being able to think in such a way as to understand his story. Jeffers says we cannot possibly know or remember "the wild God of the world," the God who will never be merciful to the arrogant hawk, who is somewhat like the stubborn king of a Greek tragedy. This is where the purpose of the poem becomes more clear. It is a kind of sermon, containing a parable that Jeffers uses to provoke us into thinking about the inhuman natural world. We are not hawks, and can never be like them (except perhaps for "men that are dying"); but somehow, through language, we can imagine what it might be like to be in the world the way that the hawk is in the world. We can contemplate the raw, arrogant, utterly wild, extravagant nature of this animal. And if we do so, we find that it is both terrifying and inexpressibly beautiful: sublime. And, for Jeffers, this act of imagining brings us closer to God, who is best described as himself "wild."

In "Hurt Hawks," Jeffers describes a connection between the living and the inanimate world, even between the living and something so vast that it includes both reality and that which is "unsheathed from reality." Rather obviously, death will ultimately be our fate as well as the hawk's, which is why Jeffers says that "men who are dying" also remember "the wild God of the world." For Jeffers, the hurt hawk—arrogant, wild, and savage—opens a visionary passage to the infinite and eternal, in comparison to which our lives are insignificant. In awakening us to this sublime comparison, Jeffers evokes profound awe at the very fact of existence, connecting our humanity back to that wild God. If we read carefully, he forces us to stop, look around, and view life with astonishment at its vastness, fierceness, and energy.

On the other hand, "The Wood-Pile," by Robert Frost, is structured like many of Frost's narrative poems. It tells a story that appears simple on the surface yet belies some complex observations and ideas beneath the gauze of seemingly insignificant events. Frost loves this kind of deception. For him, the poem is a mask for truths, a way in which commonplace events of life contain elements of much larger themes and issues. "The Wood-Pile" depicts someone walking through the woods on a winter evening and discovering a pile of maple cords somebody else has chopped and left in the middle of nowhere. The ambiguousness of this gesture—of leaving a record of labor abandoned both in space and time—presents an anomaly that triggers a whole range of speculations. The goal of the poem is not to tell a story for the reader's edification, but to show the reader how the process of mental discovery works in the mind of a persona who details and chronicles every motion of thought and observation within the experience.
The poem locates the persona in the waste landscape of winter. For Frost, the winter landscape is nature's own anomaly, a contradiction of the driving life force that lies behind the seasons, a time when the absence of life is both a troubling sign of seasonal death and a signal of mortality for the beholder. For Frost in "The Wood-Pile," the abandoned artifice and effort that went into the cutting of the tree, the chopping of the cords, and the building of the pile is a signal of how happenstance, death, and the unexpected can enter the world and make a folly of human endeavor. "I thought that only / Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks / Could so forget his handiwork on which / He spent himself, the labor of his ax," is a supposition that the hand that built the pile has turned his efforts to other endeavors. But the narrator has no proof of that, and the speculation of the life behind the work being redirected to other ends is a wish for some sign of poetic justice in a world where death is the ultimate distraction from both concentration and purpose.

What underlies "The Wood-Pile" is the problem of distractions. The trees are a distraction because they signal a lack of a defined place. The bird is a distraction from the trees, and the wood pile a distraction from the bird. The final distraction is the purposelessness of the pile itself, and, "knowing how way leads on to way" (as Frost says in "The Road Not Taken"), the lack of resolution either to thought or to action is, in itself, a problematic condition imposed upon the human experience. Art, poetry, and even wood cutting suggest an inherent desire for resolution; yet that resolution is missing from "The Wood-Pile," and if the purpose of art and poetry is to improve or reform the world as we know it, then that resolution must be present not only in narrative but in nature. The poet in Frost hopes this is so—that the power of the mind can impose purpose where there is none. But if that mind is distracted, the net result is a failure of art, and failure in art is tantamount to tragedy. Much like Hamlet's struggle to make up his mind or resolve himself to a purpose, the inner debate of the persona in the opening lines of "The Wood-Pile" shows how fragile intent, purpose, and resolution can be. The line between poetic justice (the desired resolution of a narrative or an extended action) and tragedy (the failure to achieve a reasonable resolution to the narrative) is a fine one indeed. The winding "Clematis" that ties the pile into a neat bundle is a metaphor for nature's indifference to the human need for resolution and suggests that what we perceive as organic design is merely happenstance. Nature, Frost suggests, is not a binary system of either/or, but an endless cycle of life and death. The conflict between man and nature that recurs so often in Frost's poetry is really the battle between the human desire for purpose, resolution, and enduring, life-sustaining poetic justice and nature's own agenda of cyclical life, death, and decay. "The Wood-Pile," therefore, is a study in the relationship between art and nature.

**Question # Two:**
The literary and the visual arts are very similar. Each strives to capture a moment, tell a story or pin down something that would otherwise be lost in the flow of time. Ted
Hughes's "Perfect Light" works in much the same way as Auden's poem "Musée de Beaux Arts": it is the speaker's reaction to a work of visual art that changes the way the reader looks at and understands the work being described. Explain?

**Answer:**

The literary and the visual arts are very similar. Each strives to capture a moment, tell a story or pin down something that would otherwise be lost in the flow of time. When a writer composes a piece of written work about a piece of visual art, neither of the original pieces remain unchanged: the written work affects how one views the visual and the visual work informs the way a reader approaches the written. Thus, when a famous painting is summarized in a poem, it gets to be called an example of ekphrasis, the embedding of one kind of art form inside another. Understanding this relationship is key to understanding both poems.

In 1555, Pieter Brueghel painted "The Fall of Icarus," a work depicting the mythological character who flew too close to the sun on his man-made wings. The painting shows Icarus plummeting into the sea—but doing so far in the background. The foreground features scenes from the daily grind of peasant life: plowing and shepherding are given much more space on the canvas than Icarus, who is a mere speck near the horizon. Almost four-hundred years later (in 1938), W. H. Auden published "Musée de Beaux Arts," a poetic appreciation of Brueghel's painting and an insight into the vanity of human literal (and figurative) attempts at flight. The lines in which Auden praises the old masters (like Brueghel) because they "never forgot" that "dreadful martyrdom must run its course" in a "corner" or "some untidy spot" offer a critical commentary on the painting; they also, however, affect the way that any viewer of the painting will re-examine it. Opening with generalizations and moving to specifics, the poem argues that the image presented by the "Old Masters" of the Renaissance period, that individual human suffering is viewed with apathy by others, is an accurate one. Juxtaposing images of suffering and tragedy with the banal actions of everyday life suggests that individual tragedies are individual burdens as humankind responds with indifference. Auden's poem seeks to deromanticize death, martyrdom and suffering and achieves this through the juxtaposition of "ordinary" events with universally recognized "extraordinary" ones.

Reading Auden's poem affects the way a viewer sees Breughel's painting and, of course, looking at Breughel's painting will affect the way a reader understands Auden's poem. "The Fall of Icarus" and "Musée de Beaux Arts" exist independently from each other, yet they are welded together in a kind of artistic Gestalt.

If art, as traditionally conceived, is the deliberate, labored product of human attentiveness to detail, "Musée des Beaux Arts" is centrally concerned with the temptations of artlessness. It is itself artful in its own guise of criminal artlessness. Brueghel's *The Fall of Icarus* captures the final moment of an elaborate and portentous Greek myth. Icarus was imprisoned with his father Daedalus in the labyrinth that the latter had constructed on the
island of Crete. In order to escape, Daedalus devises wax wings that will enable father and son to fly free of the island. He cautions Icarus not to soar too close to the sun, lest it melt the wings’ wax. With the arrogance of youth, Icarus ignores his father's warning and, after his wings melt, plummets into the sea and drowns. In Brueghel's rendition, as though the event were indeed marginal to the course of human affairs, Icarus' leg is the only part of him still—barely—visible above the water, in the lower right-hand corner of the canvas. The disappearance of the imprudent boy is not the center of the viewer's attention, just as it passes unnoticed by everyone else within the frame. Like Brueghel, Auden would force one to take notice of universal disregard.

All this has to do with the motif in the poem of the relation between art and human response to suffering. This motif involves the allusion, through the Breughel painting, to the myth of Icarus, who flies by means of the craft of Daedalus. The poem questions the ability of art to matter in a world of intractable apathy. Not only is Daedalus rendered powerless, but the horrendous death of his son Icarus passes unheeded and unmourned. Even the sun, which, by melting the wax wings, is most directly responsible for the catastrophe, shines without pause or compunction.

In response to suffering, art has an anesthetic effect. When made the content of art, suffering ceases to be existential in its meaning and becomes aesthetic. It is subsumed by beauty if the art is successful, by ugliness if it is not. In either case, sympathy or horror elicited by suffering gives way to aesthetic response. In this sense, art displaces suffering and generates apathy. This effect has its symbol in the flight of Icarus, which tries to do in time what art does psychologically. The wings Daedalus made for himself and his son both postpone the inevitable, and, for Icarus, inadvertently help bring it to pass. As antidotes to suffering and death, art and the art of Daedalus are limited in effect. This is true in time for Daedalean utilitarian art. It is hue in scope for fine art, which anesthetizes us to the suffering of others but not our own.

Ted Hughes’s "Perfect Light" works in much the same way as Auden's poem: it is the speaker's reaction to a work of visual art (in this case, a photograph) that changes the way the reader looks at and understands the work being described. The poem works by evoking this sense of "double time," the sense that there are, in a way, two "versions" of the photograph. First, there is a kind of prelapsarian one in which Plath and her children seem posed "as in a picture" titled "Innocence," and a kind of postlapsarian version in which the viewer's knowledge of good and evil (and suicide) make Plath's smile more enigmatic. Knowledge is power, but it also pulls one out of paradise, in this case, the paradise of innocence where there is no suicide or torrent of emotions that need to be sorted out in verse.

The poem begins by addressing Plath directly. To an innocent observer who had never heard of Sylvia Plath, Hughes's description would seem an apt one, but those who know her fate cannot be so comfortable. Plath seems posed "as in a picture" titled "Innocence," but she is not. Instead, she is posed for a picture with a much different and
unspoken title, a title that would (if one could) encapsulate all of the contrary emotions felt by Hughes while viewing this photograph. The only way in which the photograph could be titled "Innocence" would be if the person bestowing the title were wholly unaware of its subject's tragic end. Yet, Plath's own innocence of what would be her fate can still be perceived by Hughes and it is his perception of this innocence that he tries to convey to the reader.

The daffodils and "perfect light" of the title are similarly viewed as both innocent and ironic. Plath is, in one sense, like the daffodils surrounding her: beautiful and positioned so as to catch the rays of the sun just so. The light illuminates Plath's face "like a daffodil" while Plath turns her face to her daughter in the posture of a daffodil. The thoughts of the natural death of the daffodils in the photograph serve as a reminder of the unnatural death of Plath.

As Hughes's eye scans the photograph, it finds other details that suggest a longed-for (yet impossible to attain) prelapsarian view. Her "new son" is "Like a teddy bear" and "only a few weeks into his innocence"; he and Plath seem the epitome of "Mother and infant, as in the Holy portrait." The infant Jesus is, of course, a symbol of innocence, yet one is also reminded of another time in which the Virgin Mary held her son: the Pieta. Any depiction of the infant Jesus brings with it the knowledge of his ultimate fate on the cross, just as any photograph of Sylvia Plath brings with it the knowledge of her suicide.

The stanza break signifies the moment in Hughes's apprehension of the photograph when he deals directly with the fact that he is looking at a soon-to-be suicide: the "knowledge" that she would kill herself is "Inside the hill" on which she is posed. The landscape itself seems pregnant with meaning. Hughes remarks that this knowledge "Failed to reach the picture," but this is only true in one sense. While Plath is innocent of the knowledge of what she will do to herself, Hughes (and, by extension, any informed viewer) is not. The hill is compared to a "moated fort hill" to make it seem like a bastion of innocence, a place protected from the knowledge that time will bring. This knowledge, however, is "Inside the hill"—in other words, the very thing against which this bastion of innocence is supposed to stand has already corrupted it. One cannot pretend that the knowledge of Plath's suicide is not there. Thus, Plath's "next moment," a moment that would both disrupt the "perfect light" and bring her closer to her suicide, was "coming towards" her "like an infantryman / Returning slowly out of no-man's-land"—but never "reached" her. In other words, the moment is static, frozen in time by the photograph, and in that frozen moment, the violence that the "infantryman" time would bring to her is no match for the power of her innocence. Therefore, it "Simply melted into the perfect light." The poet thus stands in awe of Plath's innocence while simultaneously struggling with the knowledge that longs to assault such innocence. One cannot avoid the knowledge brought about by time, nor can one pretend that such knowledge does not affect one's perceptions of the past. Before Plath's suicide, the "perfect light" is that of perfect innocence; today, the light seen in that photograph is painful and ironic.