

## 17

## INTERNAL STRUCTURE

“Proper words in proper places”: that is how one great writer of English prose, Jonathan Swift, described good writing. A good poet finds appropriate words, and already we have looked at some implications for readers of the verbal choices a poet makes. But the poet must also decide where to put those words—how to arrange them for maximum effect—because individual words, metaphors, and symbols exist not only within phrases and sentences and rhythmic patterns but also within the larger whole of the poem. How should the words be arranged and the poem organized? What comes first and what last? Will the poem have a “plot”? What principle or idea of organization will inform it? How can words, sentences, images, ideas, and feelings be combined into a structure that holds together, seems complete, and affects readers?

Considering these questions from the poet’s point of view (What is my plan? Where shall I begin?) can help us notice the effects of structural choices. Every poem works in its own unique way, and therefore every poet must make independent decisions about how to organize an individual poem. But poems do fall into patterns of organization, sometimes because of subject matter, sometimes because of effects intended, sometimes for other reasons. A poet may consciously decide on a particular strategy, may reach instinctively for one, or may happen into one that suits the needs of the moment—a framework onto which words and sentences will hang, one by one and group by group.

When a poem tells a story, the organization may be fairly straightforward. The following poem, for example, tells a simple story largely in chronological order:

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

*Mr. Flood’s Party*

Old Eben Flood, climbing alone one night  
Over the hill between the town below  
And the forsaken upland hermitage  
That held as much as he should ever know  
5 On earth again of home, paused warily.  
The road was his and not a native near;  
-And Eben, having leisure, said aloud,  
For no man else in Tilbury Town to hear:

- “Well, Mr. Flood, we have the harvest moon  
 10 Again, and we may not have many more;  
 The bird is on the wing, the poet says,<sup>1</sup>  
 And you and I have said it here before.  
 Drink to the bird.” He raised up to the light  
 The jug that he had gone so far to fill,  
 15 And answered huskily: “Well, Mr. Flood,  
 Since you propose it, I believe I will.”
- Alone, as if enduring to the end  
 A valiant armor of scarred hopes outworn  
 He stood there in the middle of the road  
 20 Like Roland’s ghost winding a silent horn.<sup>2</sup>  
 Below him, in the town among the trees,  
 Where friends of other days had honored him,  
 A phantom salutation of the dead  
 Rang thinly till old Eben’s eyes were dim.
- 25 Then, as a mother lays her sleeping child  
 Down tenderly, fearing it may awake  
 He set the jug down slowly at his feet  
 With trembling care, knowing that most things break;  
 And only when assured that on firm earth  
 30 It stood, as the uncertain lives of men  
 Assuredly did not, he paced away,  
 And with his hand extended paused again:
- “Well, Mr. Flood, we have not met like this  
 In a long time; and many a change has come  
 35 To both of us, I fear, since last it was  
 We had a drop together. Welcome home!”  
 Convivially returning with himself,  
 Again he raised the jug up to the light;  
 And with an acquiescent quaver said:  
 40 “Well, Mr. Flood, if you insist, I might.
- “Only a very little, Mr. Flood—  
 For auld lang syne. No more, sir; that will do.”  
 So, for the time, apparently it did,  
 And Eben evidently thought so too;  
 45 For soon amid the silver loneliness  
 Of night he lifted up his voice and sang,  
 Secure, with only two moons listening,  
 Until the whole harmonious landscape rang—
- “For auld lang syne.” The weary throat gave out,  
 50 The last word wavered, and the song was done.

1. Edward FitzGerald, in “The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám” (more or less a translation of an Arab original), so describes the “Bird of Time.”

2. According to French legend, the hero Roland used his powerful ivory horn to warn his allies of impending attack.

He raised again the jug regretfully  
 And shook his head, and was again alone.  
 There was not much that was ahead of him,  
 And there was nothing in the town below—  
 55 Where strangers would have shut the many doors  
 That many friends had opened long ago.

1921

The fairly simple **narrative structure** here is based on the gradual unfolding of the story. After old Eben is introduced and situated in relation to the town and his home, the “plot” unfolds: he sits down in the road, reviews his life, reflects on the present, and has a drink—several drinks, in fact, as he thinks about passing time and growing old; then he sings and considers going “home.” Not much happens, really; we get a vignette of Mr. Flood between two places and two times. But there *is* action, and the poem’s movement—its organization and structure—depends on it: Mr. Flood in motion, in stasis, and then, again, contemplating motion. This counts as event, and a certain, limited chronological movement. We could say that a spare sort of story takes place, like that in Dickey’s “Cherrylog Road” (chapter 14). The poem’s organization—its structural principle—involves the passing of time, action moving forward, a larger story being revealed by the few moments depicted here.

“Mr. Flood’s Party” presents about as much story as a short poem ever does, but like most poems it doesn’t really emphasize the developing action—which all seems fairly predictable once we “get” who Eben is, how old he is, and what place he occupies in the communal memory of Tilbury Town and vice versa. Rather, the movement forward in time dictates the shape of the poem, determines the way it presents its images, ideas, themes. Nearly everything occurs within an easy-to-follow chronology.

But even here, in this most simple narrative structure, we note complications. One complication is in the use of time itself, for “old” time and “present” time seem posed against each other as a structural principle, too, one in tension with the chronological movement: Eben’s past, as contrasted with his present and limited future, focuses the poem’s attention, and in some ways the contrast between what was and what is seems even more important than the brief movement through present time that gets the most obvious attention in the poem. Then, too, “character”—Eben’s character and that of the townspeople of later generations—gets a lot of attention, even as the chronology moves forward. More than one structural principle is at work here. We may identify the main movement of the poem as chronological and its principal structure as narrative, but to be fair and full in our discussion we have to note several other competing organizational forces at work—principles of comparison and contrast, for example, and of descriptive elaboration.

Most poems work with this kind of complexity, and identifying a single structure behind any poem involves a sense of the organizational principle that makes it work, while at the same time recognizing that other principles repeatedly, perhaps continually, compete for our attention. A poem’s structure involves its conceptual framework—what principle best explains its organization and movement—and it is often useful to identify one dominating kind of structure, such as nar-

rative structure, that gives the poem its shape. But we need to recognize from the start that most poems follow structural models loosely. Finding an appropriate label to describe the structure of a particular poem can help in analyzing the poem's other aspects, but the label itself has no magic.

*Back of the idea of organic form is the concept that there is a form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and reveal.*

—DENISE LEVERTOV

Purely narrative poems are often very long and often include many features that are not, strictly speaking, closely connected to the narrative or linked to a strict chronology. Very often a poem moves from a narrative of an event to some sort of commentary or reflection on it, as in Philip Larkin's "Church Going" (below, in this chapter). Reflection can be included along the way or may be implicit in the way the story is narrated, as in Maxine Kumin's "Woodchucks" (chapter 12), where we focus more on the narrator and her responses than on the events in the story.

Just as poems sometimes take on a structure like that of a story, they sometimes borrow the structures of plays. The following poem has a **dramatic structure**; it consists of a series of scenes, each of which is presented vividly and in detail, as if on stage.

#### HOWARD NEMEROV

##### *The Goose Fish*

- On the long shore, lit by the moon  
 To show them properly alone,  
 Two lovers suddenly embraced  
 So that their shadows were as one.
- 5 The ordinary night was graced  
 For them by the swift tide of blood  
 That silently they took at flood.  
 And for a little time they prized  
 Themselves emparadised.
- 10 Then, as if shaken by stage-fright  
 Beneath the hard moon's bony light,  
 They stood together on the sand  
 Embarrassed in each other's sight  
 But still conspiring hand in hand,
- 15 Until they saw, there underfoot,  
 As though the world had found them out,  
 The goose fish turning up, though dead,  
 His hugely grinning head.
- There in the china light he lay,  
 20 Most ancient and corrupt and gray.  
 They hesitated at his smile,  
 Wondering what it seemed to say  
 To lovers who a little while

- Before had thought to understand,  
 25 By violence upon the sand,  
 The only way that could be known  
 To make a world their own.
- It was a wide and moony grin  
 Together peaceful and obscene;  
 30 They knew not what he would express,  
 So finished a comedian  
 He might mean failure or success,  
 But took it for an emblem of  
 Their sudden, new and guilty love  
 35 To be observed by, when they kissed,  
 That rigid optimist.
- So he became their patriarch,  
 Dreadfully mild in the half-dark.  
 His throat that the sand seemed to choke,  
 40 His picket teeth, these left their mark  
 But never did explain the joke  
 That so amused him, lying there  
 While the moon went down to disappear  
 Along the still and tilted track  
 45 That bears the zodiac.

1955

The first stanza sets the scene—a sandy shore in moonlight—and presents, in fact, the major action of the poem. The rest of the poem dramatizes the lovers' reactions: their initial embarrassment and feelings of guilt (stanza 2), their attempt to interpret the goose fish's smile (stanza 3), their decision to make him, whatever his meaning, the "emblem" of their love (stanza 4), and their acceptance of the fish's ambiguity and of their own relationship (stanza 5). The five stanzas do not exactly present five different scenes or angles on the action, but they do present separate dramatic moments, even if little time has elapsed between them. Almost like a play of five very short acts, the poem traces the drama of the lovers' discovery of themselves and their coming to terms with the meaning of their action. As in many plays, the central event (their lovemaking) is not the central focus of the drama, although the drama is based upon that event and could not take place without it. The poem depicts that event swiftly but very vividly through figurative language: "they took at flood" the "swift tide of blood." The lovers then briefly feel "emparadised," but the poem concentrates on their later reactions.

Their sudden discovery of the fish, a rude shock, injects a grotesque, almost macabre, note into the poem. From a vision of paradise, the poem seems for a moment to turn toward gothic horror when the lovers discover that they have, after all, been seen—and by such a ghoulish spectator. The last three stanzas gradually re-create the intruder in their minds, as they admit that their act of love exists not in isolation, but rather as part of a continuum, as part of their relationship to the larger world, even (at the end) within the context of the earth itself, and the moon, and the stars. In retrospect, we can see that even at the moment of passion

the lovers were in touch with larger processes controlled by the presiding moon (“the swift *tide* of blood”), but neither they nor we had understood their act as such then, and the poem is about this gradual recognition of their “place” in time and space.

Stages of feeling and knowing rather than specific visual scenes determine the poem’s progress, and its dramatic structure depends upon internal perceptions and internal states of mind rather than dialogue and events. Visualization and images help to organize the poem, too. Notice in particular how the two most striking visual features—the fish and the moon—are presented stanza by stanza. In stanza 1, the fish does not appear, and the moon exists plain; it is only mentioned, not described, and its light provides a stage spotlight to assure not center-stage attention, but rather total privacy: the moon serves as a lookout for the lovers. The stage imagery, barely suggested by the light in stanza 1, is articulated in stanza 2, and there the moon is “hard” and its light “bony”; its characteristics seem more appropriate to the fish, which has now become visible. In stanza 3, the moon’s light comes to seem fragile (“china”) as it exposes the fish directly; the moon’s role as lookout and protector seems abandoned, or at least endangered. No moon appears in stanza 4, but the fish’s grin is “wide and moony,” almost as if the two onlookers, one earthly and dead, the other heavenly and eternal, have merged, as they nearly were by the imagery in stanza 2. And in stanza 5, the fish becomes a friend, a comedian, an optimist, an emblem, and a patriarch of their love—and his new position in collaboration with the lovers is presided over by the moon going about its eternal business. The moon—providing the stage light for the poem and the means by which not only the fish but the meaning of the lovers’ act is discovered—has also helped to organize the poem, partly as a dramatic accessory, partly as imagery.

The following dramatic poem represents a composite of several similar experiences (compare Blake’s “London” [chapter 12] and Dickey’s “Cherrylog Road” [chapter 14]) rather than a single event—a fairly common pattern in dramatic poems:

#### PHILIP LARKIN

##### *Church Going*

- Once I am sure there’s nothing going on  
 I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
 Another church: matting, seats, and stone,  
 And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
 5 For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
 Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
 And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
 Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
 My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,  
 10 Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
 From where I stand, the roof looks almost new—

- Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.  
 Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
 Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
 15 "Here endeth" much more loudly than I'd meant.  
 The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door  
 I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
 Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.
- Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
 20 And always end much at a loss like this,  
 Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
 When churches fall completely out of use  
 What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
 A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
 25 Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,  
 And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
 Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?
- Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
 To make their children touch a particular stone;  
 30 Pick simples<sup>3</sup> for a cancer; or on some  
 Advised night see walking a dead one?  
 Power of some sort or other will go on  
 In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
 But superstition, like belief, must die,  
 35 And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
 Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,
- A shape less recognizable each week,  
 A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
 Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
 40 This place for what it was; one of the crew  
 That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts<sup>4</sup> were?  
 Some ruin-bibber,<sup>5</sup> randy for antique,  
 Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff  
 Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?  
 45 Or will he be my representative,
- Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt  
 Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground  
 Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt  
 So long and equably what since is found  
 50 Only in separation—marriage, and birth,  
 And death, and thoughts of these—for whom was built  
 This special shell? For, though I've no idea

3. Medicinal herbs.

4. Galleries atop the screens (on which crosses are mounted) that divide the naves or main bodies of churches from the choirs or chancels.

5. Literally, ruin-drinker: someone extremely attracted to antiquarian objects.

What this accoutered frowsty barn is worth,  
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

- 55 A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent<sup>6</sup> air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
60 A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

1955

Ultimately, Larkin's poem focuses on what it means to visit churches, what it might be that church buildings represent, and what we should make of the fact that "church going" (in the usual sense of the word) has declined so much. The poem uses a *different* sort of church going (visitation by tourists) to consider larger questions about the relationship of religion to culture and history. The poem is, finally, a rather philosophical one about the directions of English culture, and through an enumeration of religious objects and rituals it reviews part of the history of that culture. It tells a kind of story first, through one lengthy dramatized scene, in order to comment later on what the place and the experience may mean, and the larger conclusion derives from the particulars of what the speaker does and touches. By the end of stanza 2 the action is over, but that action, we are told, stands for many such visits to similar churches; after that, the next five stanzas present reflection and discussion.

"Church Going" is a curious poem in many ways. It goes to a lot of trouble to characterize its speaker, who seems a rather odd choice as a commentator on the state of religion. His informal attire (he takes off his cycle-clips at the end of stanza 1) and his less than worshipful behavior do not at first make him seem like a serious philosopher. He is not disrespectful or sacrilegious, and before the end of stanza 1 he has tried to describe the "awkward reverence" he feels; but his overly emphatic imitation of part of the service stamps him as playful, a little satirical. He is a tourist here, not someone who regularly drops in for prayer or meditation in the usual sense. And yet those early details give him credentials, in a way; he knows the names of religious objects and has some history of churches in his grasp. Clearly he does this sort of church going habitually ("Yet stop I did: in fact I often do," line 19) because he wonders seriously what it all means—now—in comparison to what it meant to religious worshippers in times past. Ultimately, he takes the church, its cultural meaning, and its function seriously (lines 55 ff.), and he understands the importance of the church in the history of his culture. Thus the relatively brief drama provides a context for the rambling reflections that grow out of the speaker's dramatic experience.

6. Blended.



Sometimes poems are organized by contrasts, and they conveniently set one thing up against another that is quite different. Notice, for example, how the following poem carefully contrasts two worlds:

PAT MORA

*Sonrisas*

- I live in a doorway  
 between two rooms, I hear  
 quiet clicks, cups of black  
 coffee, *click, click* like facts  
 5 budgets, tenure, curriculum,  
 from careful women in crisp beige  
 suits, quick beige smiles  
 that seldom sneak into their eyes.
- I peek  
 10 in the other room señoras  
 in faded dresses stir sweet  
 milk coffee, laughter whirls  
 with steam from fresh *tamales*  
*sh, sh, mucho ruido,*<sup>7</sup>  
 15 they scold one another,  
 press their lips, trap smiles  
 in their dark, Mexican eyes.

1986

Here different words, habits, and values characterize the worlds of the two sets of characters, and the poem is organized largely by the contrasts between them. The meaning of the poem (the difference between the two worlds) is very nearly the same as the structure.

Poems often have **discursive structures**, too; that is, they may be organized like a treatise, an argument, or an essay. “First,” they say, “and second . . . and third . . .” This sort of 1–2–3 structure takes a variety of forms depending on what is being enumerated or argued. Discursive structures help organize poems such as Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (later in this chapter), where the wind drives a leaf in Part I, a cloud in Part II, a wave in Part III, and then, after a summary and statement of the speaker’s ambitious hope in Part IV, is asked to make the speaker a lyre in Part V.

Poems may borrow their organizational strategies from many places, imitating chronological, visual, or discursive shapes in reality or in other works of art. Sometimes poems strive to be almost purely descriptive of someone or something (using **descriptive structures**), in which case poets have to make organizational decisions much as painters or photographers would, deciding first how a whole scene should

7. A lot of noise.

look, then putting the parts into proper place for the whole. Of course, poems must present their details sequentially, not all at once as actual pictures more or less can, so poets must decide where to start a description (at the left? center? top?) and what sort of movement to use (linear across the scene? clockwise?). But if using words instead of paint or film has some drawbacks, it also has particular advantages: figurative language can be a part of description, or an adjunct to it. Poets can insert comparisons at any point without necessarily disturbing the unity of their descriptions.

Some poems use **imitative structures**, mirroring as exactly as possible the structure of something that already exists as an object and can be seen—another poem perhaps, as in Koch’s “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams” (chapter 22). Other poems use **reflective** (or **meditative**) **structures**, pondering a subject, theme, or event, and letting the mind play with it, skipping (logically or not) from one sound to another, or to related thoughts or objects as the mind encounters them.

Although the following poem employs several organizational principles, it ultimately takes its structure from an important shift in the speaker’s attitude as she reviews, ponders, and rethinks events of long ago.

## SHARON OLDS

### *The Victims*

- When Mother divorced you, we were glad. She took it and  
took it, in silence, all those years and then  
kicked you out, suddenly, and her  
kids loved it. Then you were fired, and we  
5 grinned inside, the way people grinned when  
Nixon’s helicopter lifted off the South  
Lawn for the last time.<sup>8</sup> We were tickled  
to think of your office taken away,  
your secretaries taken away,  
10 your lunches with three double bourbons,  
your pencils, your reams of paper. Would they take your  
suits back, too, those dark  
carcasses hung in your closet, and the black  
noses of your shoes with their large pores?  
15 She had taught us to take it, to hate you and take it  
until we pricked with her for your  
annihilation, Father. Now I  
pass the bums in doorways, the white  
slugs of their bodies gleaming through slits in their  
20 suits of compressed silt, the stained  
flippers of their hands, the underwater

8. When Richard Nixon resigned the U.S. presidency on August 8, 1974, his exit from the White House (by helicopter from the lawn) was televised live.

fire of their eyes, ships gone down with the  
 lanterns lit, and I wonder who took it and  
 took it from them in silence until they had  
 25 given it all away and had nothing  
 left but this.

1984

"The Victims" divides basically into two parts. In the first two-thirds of the poem (from line 1 to the middle of line 17), the speaker evokes her father (the "you" of lines 1, 3, and so forth), who had been guilty of terrible habits and behavior when the speaker was young and was kicked out suddenly and divorced by the speaker's mother (lines 1-3). He was then fired from his job (line 4) and lost his whole way of life (lines 8-12), and the speaker (taught by the mother, lines 15-17) recalls celebrating every defeat and every loss ("we pricked with her for your annihilation," lines 16-17). The mother is regarded as a victim ("She took it and took it, in silence, all those years" [lines 1-2]), and the speaker forms an indivisible unit with her and the other children ("her kids," lines 3-4). They are the "we" of the first part of the poem. They were "glad" (line 1) at the divorce; they "loved it" (line 4) when the mother kicked out the father; they "grinned" (line 5) when the father was fired; they were "tickled" (line 7) when he lost his job, his secretaries, and his daily life. Only at the end of the first section does the speaker (now older but remembering what it was like to be a child) recognize that the mother was responsible for the easy, childish vision of the father's guilt ("She had taught us to take it, to hate you and take it" [line 15]); nevertheless, all sympathy in this part of the poem is with the mother and her children, while all of the imagery is entirely unfavorable to the father. The family reacted to the father's misfortunes the way observers responded to the retreat in disgrace of Richard Nixon from the U.S. presidency. The father seems to have led a luxurious and insensitive life, with lots of support in his office (lines 8-11), fancy clothes (lines 12-14), and decadent lunches (line 10); his artificial identity seemed haunting and frightening (lines 11-14) to the speaker as child.

But in line 17, the poem shifts its focus and tone. The "you" in the poem is now, suddenly, "Father." A bit of sympathy begins to surface for "bums in doorways" (line 18), who begin to seem like victims, too; their bodies are "slugs" (line 19), their suits are made of residual waste (lines 19-20), and their hands are reduced to nearly useless "flippers" (line 21). Their eyes contain fire (line 22), but it is as if they retain only a spark of life in their submerged and dying state. The speaker has not forgotten the cruelty and insensitivity remembered in the first part of the poem, but the blame seems to have shifted somewhat and the father is not the only villain, nor are the mother and children the only victims. Look carefully at how the existence of street people recalls earlier details about the father, how sympathy for his plight is elicited from us, and how the definition of *victim* shifts.

Imagery, words, attitudes, and narrative are different in the two parts of the poem, and the second half carefully qualifies the first, as if to illustrate the more mature and considered attitudes of the speaker in her older years—a qualification of the easy imitation of the earlier years, when the mother's views dominated and set the tone. Change has governed the poem's structure here; differences in age and attitude are supported by an entirely different point of view and frame of reference.

The paradigms (or models) for organizing poems are, finally, not all that different from those of prose. It may be easier to organize something short rather than something long, but the question of intensity becomes comparatively more important in shorter works. Basically, the problem of how to organize one's material is, for the writer, first of all a matter of deciding what kind of thing one wants to create, of having its purposes and effects clearly in mind. That means that every poem will differ somewhat from every other, but it also means that purposeful patterns—narrative, dramatic, descriptive, imitative, or reflective—may help writers organize and develop their ideas. A consciousness of purpose and effect can help the reader see *how* a poem proceeds toward its goal. And seeing how a poem is organized is, in turn, often a good way of seeing where it is going and what its real concerns and purposes may be. Often a poem's organization helps to clarify the particular effects that the poet wishes to generate. In a good poem, means and ends are closely related, and a reader who is a good observer of one will be rewarded with the other.

• • •

#### ANONYMOUS

#### *Sir Patrick Spens*

The king sits in Dumferling toune,<sup>9</sup>  
 Drinking the blude-reid<sup>1</sup> wine:  
 "O whar will I get guid sailor,  
 To sail this ship of mine?"

- 5 Up and spake an eldern knicht,  
 Sat at the king's richt knee:  
 "Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor  
 That sails upon the sea."

- The king has written a braid<sup>2</sup> letter  
 10 And signed it wi' his hand,  
 And sent it to Sir Patrick Spens,  
 Was walking on the sand.

- The first line that Sir Patrick read,  
 A loud lauch<sup>3</sup> lauched he;  
 15 The next line that Sir Patrick read,  
 The tear blinded his ee.<sup>4</sup>

- "O wha is this has done this deed,  
 This il deed done to me,  
 To send me out this time o' the year,  
 20 To sail upon the sea?"

9. Town. 1. Blood-red. 2. Broad: explicit. 3. Laugh. 4. Eye.

- “Make haste, make haste, my merry men all,  
 Our guid ship sails the morn.”  
 “O say na sae,<sup>5</sup> my master dear,  
 For I fear a deadly storm.
- 25 “Late, late yestre’en I saw the new moon  
 Wi’ the auld moon in her arm,  
 And I fear, I fear, my dear mastér,  
 That we will come to harm.”
- O our Scots nobles were richt laith<sup>6</sup>  
 30 To weet their cork-heeled shoon,<sup>7</sup>  
 But lang owre a<sup>8</sup> the play were played  
 Their hats they swam aboon.<sup>9</sup>
- O lang, lang, may their ladies sit,  
 Wi’ their fans into their hand,  
 35 Or ere they see Sir Patrick Spens  
 Come sailing to the land.
- O lang, lang, may the ladies stand  
 Wi’ their gold kems<sup>1</sup> in their hair,  
 Waiting for their ain<sup>2</sup> dear lords,  
 40 For they’ll see them na mair.
- Half o’er, half o’er to Aberdour  
 It’s fifty fadom deep,  
 And there lies guid Sir Patrick Spens  
 Wi’ the Scots lords at his feet.

probably 13th century

- What event is hinted at in line 32 (“Their hats they swam aboon”) and in the poem’s final stanza? What is the effect of depicting the poem’s principal action indirectly?

## WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

### *The Dance*

- In Brueghel’s great picture, *The Kermess*,<sup>3</sup>  
 the dancers go round, they go round and  
 around, the squeal and the blare and the  
 tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles  
 5 tipping their bellies (round as the thick-

5. Not so. 6. Right loath: very reluctant.

7. To wet their cork-heeled shoes. Cork was expensive, and, therefore, such shoes were a mark of wealth and status. 8. Before all. 9. Their hats swam above them. 1. Combs. 2. Own.

3. A painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525?–1569).

sided glasses whose wash they impound)  
 their hips and their bellies off balance  
 to turn them. Kicking and rolling about  
 the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those  
 10 shanks must be sound to bear up under such  
 rollicking measures, prance as they dance  
 in Brueghel's great picture, *The Kermess*.

1944

- Why is it appropriate to the subject, a painting, to begin and end the poem with the same line? In what ways is the poem like the dance it depicts?

## EMILY DICKINSON

*[The Wind begun to knead the Grass—]*

The Wind begun to knead the Grass—  
 As Women do a Dough—  
 He flung a Hand full at the Plain—  
 A Hand full at the Sky—  
 5 The Leaves unhooked themselves from Trees—  
 And started all abroad—  
 The Dust did scoop itself like Hands—  
 And throw away the Road—  
 The Wagons quickened on the Street—  
 10 The Thunders gossiped low—  
 The Lightning showed a Yellow Head—  
 And then a livid Toe—  
 The Birds put up the Bars to Nests—  
 The Cattle flung to Barns—  
 15 Then came one drop of Giant Rain—  
 And then, as if the Hands  
 That held the Dams—had parted hold—  
 The Waters Wrecked the Sky—  
 20 But overlooked my Father's House—  
 Just Quartering a Tree—

1864

- What happens in this poem's final line? How is this the work of "the Hands"?

## WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

*[Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame]*

- Th'expense of spirit in a waste<sup>4</sup> of shame  
 Is lust in action; and, till action, lust  
 Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,  
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;  
 5 Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight:  
 Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,  
 Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,  
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad:  
 Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;  
 10 Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;  
 A bliss in proof;<sup>5</sup> and proved, a very woe;  
 Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.  
 All this the world well knows; yet none knows well  
 To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

1609

- Paraphrase this poem. What emotional stages accompany the carrying out of a violent or lustful act? Is Shakespeare an insightful psychologist? What is his major insight about how lust works?

## CATHY SONG

*Heaven*

- He thinks when we die we'll go to China.  
 Think of it—a Chinese heaven  
 where, except for his blond hair,  
 the part that belongs to his father,  
 5 everyone will look like him.  
 China, that blue flower on the map,  
 bluer than the sea  
 his hand must span like a bridge  
 to reach it.  
 10 An octave away.  
 I've never seen it.  
 It's as if I can't sing that far.  
 But look—  
 on the map, this black dot.  
 15 Here is where we live,

4. Using up; also, desert. *Expense*: expending    5. In the act.

- on the pancake plains  
 just east of the Rockies,  
 on the other side of the clouds.  
 A mile above the sea,  
 20 the air is so thin, you can starve on it.  
 No bamboo trees  
 But the alpine equivalent,  
 reedy aspen with light, fluttering leaves.  
 Did a boy in Guangzhou<sup>6</sup> dream of this  
 25 as his last stop?  
 I've heard the trains at night  
 whistling past our yards,  
 what we've come to own,  
 the broken fences, the whiny dog, the rattletrap cars.  
 30 It's still the wild west,  
 mean and grubby,  
 the shootouts and fistfights in the back alley.  
 With my son the dreamer  
 and my daughter, who is too young to walk,  
 35 I've sat in this spot  
 and wondered why here?  
 Why in this short life,  
 this town, this creek they call a river?  
  
 He had never planned to stay,  
 40 the boy who helped to build  
 the railroads for a dollar a day.<sup>7</sup>  
 He had always meant to go back.  
 When did he finally know  
 that each mile of track led him further away,  
 45 that he would die in his sleep,  
 dispossessed,  
 having seen Gold Mountain,<sup>8</sup>  
 the icy wind tunneling through it,  
 these landlocked, makeshift ghost towns?  
 50 It must be in the blood,  
 this notion of returning.  
 It skipped two generations, lay fallow,  
 the garden an unmarked grave.  
 On a spring sweater day  
 55 it's as if we remember him.  
 I call to the children.  
 We can see the mountains  
 shimmering blue above the air.  
 If you look really hard

6. Usually called Canton, a seaport city in southeastern China.

7. The railroads used immigrant day laborers (mostly Chinese) to lay the tracks in the nineteenth century.

8. Chinese term for America, especially common in the nineteenth century.



60 says my son the dreamer,  
 leaning out from the laundry's rigging,  
 the work shirts fluttering like sails,  
 you can see all the way to heaven.

1988

- Who is "He" in this poem's first line? What family history is recounted in the poem?

## STEPHEN DUNN

*Poetry*

It makes no difference where one starts,  
 doesn't every beginning subvert  
 the tyrannies of time and place?  
 New Jersey or Vermont, it's the gray zone  
 5 where I mostly find myself  
 with little purpose or design.  
 An apple orchard, an old hotel—  
 when I introduce them  
 I feel I've been taken somewhere  
 10 I've been before; such comfort,  
 like the sound of consecutive iambs  
 to the nostalgic ear.  
 Yet it helps as well  
 here in the middle, somewhat amused,  
 15 to have a fast red car  
 and a winding, country road.  
 To forget oneself can be an art.  
 "Frost was wrong about free verse,"  
 she said to me. "Tear the net down,  
 20 turn the court into a dance floor."  
 She happened to be good looking, too,  
 which seemed to further enliven her remark.  
 It always makes a difference  
 how one ends, aren't endings where you  
 25 shut but don't lock the door?  
 Strange music beginning,  
 the dance floor getting crowded now.

1996

- In what way is this poem an *ars poetica*—that is, a declaration of a poet's aims and practices? What is meant by the final two lines?

## PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

*Ode to the West Wind*

## I

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
 Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
 5 Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,  
 Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The wingéd seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
 Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
 Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

10 Her clarion<sup>9</sup> o'er the dreaming earth, and fill  
 (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
 With living hues and odors plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;  
 Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!

## II

15 Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,  
 Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,  
 Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angels<sup>1</sup> of rain and lightning: there are spread  
 On the blue surface of thine aëry surge,

20 Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Maenad,<sup>2</sup> even from the dim verge  
 Of the horizon to the zenith's height,  
 The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge

Of the dying year, to which this closing night

25 Will be the dome of a vast sepulcher,  
 Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapors, from whose solid atmosphere  
 Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh, hear!

## III

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams

30 The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,  
 Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams,

9. Trumpet call. 1. Messengers.

2. A frenzied female votary of Dionysus, the Greek god of vegetation and fertility who was supposed to die in the fall and rise again each spring.

Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,<sup>3</sup>  
 And saw in sleep old palaces and towers  
 Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

- 35 All overgrown with azure moss and flowers  
 So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou  
 For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

- Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below  
 The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear  
 40 The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,  
 And tremble and despoil themselves:<sup>4</sup> oh, hear!

#### IV

- If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;  
 If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;  
 45 A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free  
 Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even  
 I were as in my boyhood, and could be

- The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,  
 50 As then, when to outstrip thy skyeey speed  
 Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.  
 Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!  
 I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

- 55 A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed  
 One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

#### V

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:  
 What if my leaves are falling like its own!  
 The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

- 60 Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,  
 Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,  
 My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
 Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!

- 65 And, by the incantation of this verse,

3. Where Roman emperors had erected villas, west of Naples.

4. The vegetation at the bottom of the sea . . . sympathizes with that of the land in the change of seasons [Shelley's note].

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
 Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
 Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,  
 70 If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

1820

- What attributes of the West Wind does the speaker want his poetry to embody? In what ways is this poem like the wind it describes?

## W. H. AUDEN

### *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*

(d. January, 1939)

I

He disappeared in the dead of winter:  
 The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,  
 And snow disfigured the public statues;  
 The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.

5 What instruments we have agree  
 The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness  
 The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,  
 The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;

10 By mourning tongues  
 The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,  
 An afternoon of nurses and rumors;  
 The provinces of his body revolted,

15 The squares of his mind were empty,  
 Silence invaded the suburbs,  
 The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities  
 And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,  
 20 To find his happiness in another kind of wood  
 And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.

The words of a dead man  
 Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of tomorrow

25 When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,<sup>5</sup>  
 And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,

5. The Paris stock exchange.

- And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,  
 A few thousand will think of this day  
 As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.  
 30 What instruments we have agree  
 The day of his death was a dark cold day.

## II

- You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:  
 The parish of rich women, physical decay,  
 Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.  
 35 Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,  
 For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
 In the valley of its making where executives  
 Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
 From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
 40 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
 A way of happening, a mouth.

## III

- Earth, receive an honored guest:  
 William Yeats is laid to rest.  
 Let the Irish vessel lie  
 45 Emptied of its poetry.  
 In the nightmare of the dark  
 All the dogs of Europe bark,  
 And the living nations wait,  
 Each sequestered in its hate;  
 50 Intellectual disgrace  
 Stares from every human face,  
 And the seas of pity lie  
 Locked and frozen in each eye.  
 Follow, poet, follow right  
 55 To the bottom of the night,  
 With your unconstraining voice  
 Still persuade us to rejoice;  
 With the farming of a verse  
 Make a vineyard of the curse,  
 60 Sing of human unsuccess  
 In a rapture of distress;  
 In the deserts of the heart  
 Let the healing fountain start,  
 In the prison of his days  
 65 Teach the free man how to praise.  
 1939

- What is meant by “he became his admirers” (line 17)? What meaning is added to line 36 (“For poetry makes nothing happen . . .”) by the poem’s final three stanzas?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. How many different “scenes” can you identify in “Sir Patrick Spens”? Write an essay in which you first summarize the story recounted by the poem, and then discuss the methods of storytelling employed by the poem. Consider the transitions from one scene to another and the almost cinematic “fading” effect between scenes?
2. What is the psychology of passion described in Shakespeare’s “Th’ expense of spirit in a waste of shame”? Write an essay in which you analyze the way the poem dissects the emotions that come before, during, and after a violent or lustful act. What are the “heaven” and “hell” mentioned in the poem’s last line?
3. What words and patterns are repeated in the different stanzas of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”? What differences are there from stanza to stanza? What “progress” does the poem make? Write an essay in which you discuss the ways that meaning and structure are intertwined in Shelley’s poem.
4. Write an essay in which you explore the structure of Auden’s “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.” What is the logic of the poem? Why does each of the three parts have its own distinct subject, tone, and poetic approach? What subjects does the poem encompass besides the death of Yeats?
5. Pick out any poem you have read in this book that seems particularly effective in the way it is put together. Write an essay in which you consider how the poem is organized—that is, what structural principles it employs. What do the choices of speaker, situation, and setting have to do with the poem’s structure? What other artistic decisions contribute to its structure?