Childhood Study Guide

Childhood by Rainer Maria Rilke

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Introduction

Rainer Maria Rilke's "Childhood" is included in his collection *Das Buch der Bilder*, first published in 1902. Various writers have translated the volume as "The Book of Images" or "The Book of Pictures." The poem can also be found in Robert Bly's collection of translations, *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*. *The Book of Images* was published just after *The Book of Hours* and just before *New Poems* and marks a shift in Rilke's poetic development toward more imagistic, slightly less sentimental verse. Written in thirty-three lines of rhymed iambic pentameter verse and fit into four irregular stanzas, "Childhood" addresses loneliness and the passage of time, typical subjects for Rilke, who spent his life attempting to describe the effects of time's onslaught. Rilke wrote a number of poems about childhood, including "Duration of Childhood" and "The Child." All of these poems express feelings of wonder and bafflement and grapple with the puzzle of human existence. Childhood was a difficult time for Rilke. He was an effeminate and fragile child, and not at all cut out for the military schools to which his father sent him. Many of the images of childhood in his poems are dramatizations of his own memories.

Author Biography

Born December 4, 1875, in Prague, Austria, Rene Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria Rilke was the only child of Josef Rilke, a minor railway official, and Sophie Entz Rilke. In 1897, Rilke changed his name to Rainer Maria Rilke. By most accounts, he had an unhappy childhood, raised by parents who were mired in an unhappy marriage. Rilke was educated at military boarding schools and, later, studied philosophy for a short time at Prague's Charles-Ferdinand University. His real education, however, came after he left Prague. In Munich, he socialized with the city's literati, published two poetry collections, and staged a few of his plays. In Venice, he met Lou Andreas-Salome, an intellectual more than a decade older than Rilke, who had a strong influence on many of Europe's writers and artists, including Freidrich Nietzsche. Andreas- Salome became Rilke's lover for a short time, accompanied him on his travels throughout Europe and Russia, and had a lasting influence on his thinking and work.

Raised Roman Catholic, Rilke was obsessed with religious questions, though he eschewed conventional religious thinking. He believed the human condition was essentially that of aloneness and that human beings could access God the most when they were alone. Because his early poems attempted to describe the contours of his own consciousness, they were often abstract and largely unsuccessful. However, once Rilke began studying the visual arts and learning the ways in which painters created effects, his poetry changed. The first book that began showing these changes was *Das Buch der Bilder* (The Book of Images) published in 1902. In poems such as "Childhood," Rilke uses finely honed language and focused similes to depict universal experiences.

Ril ke's style changed even more after serving as secretary to sculptor Auguste Rodin in Paris from 1905-1906. In place of the often abstract and sentimental verse he had been writing, he began writing poems that described concrete subjects in symbolic yet detailed terms, and his poems took on a more chiseled, tightly structured quality. He called these compositions "thing poems" and published a collection of them titled *New Poems* (1907). Following the publication of *New Poems*, Rilke began an itinerant existence over the next seven years, traveling to more than fifty different places, including North Africa, Paris, Egypt, Berlin, Spain (Toledo), and Duino (between Venice and Triest), where, as the guest of Princess Marie Tour en Taxis, he began writing what became *The Duino Elegies* (1923), the best-known and most celebrated of his works.

In addition to *The Duino Elegies*, Rilke's most popular and enduring works include *The Book of Hours* (1905), *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923), the novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1930), and *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929), a collection of advice in the form of letters. After a lifetime spent battling various ailments, Rilke died of leukemia on December 29, 1926, in Montreaux, Switzerland.

Poem Text

Time in school drags along with so much worry,
and waiting, things so dumb and stupid.
Oh loneliness, oh heavy lumpish time . . .
Free at last: lights and colors and noises;
water leaps out of fountains into the air,
and the world is so huge in the woody places.
And moving through it in your short clothes,
and you don't walk the way the others do□
Such marvelous time, such time passing on,
such loneliness.

How strange to see into it all from far away:
men and women, there's a man, one more woman;
children's bright colors make them stand out;
and here a house and now and then a dog
and terror all at once replaced by total trust□

What crazy mourning, what dream, what heaviness,
what deepness without end.
And playing: a hoop, and a bat, and a ball,
in some green place as the light fades away.
And not noticing, you brush against a grownup,
rushing blindly around in tag, half-crazed,
but when the light fades you go with small
puppety steps home, your hand firmly held□
Such oceanic vision that is fading,
such a constant worry, such weight.

Sometimes also kneeling for hours on end
with a tiny sailboat at a grayish pond,
all forgotten because sails more beautiful
than yours go on crossing the circles;
and one had to think always about the pale
narrow face looking up as it sank down□
Oh, childhood, what was us going away,
going where? Where?

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

"Childhood" begins with the speaker addressing a child who is in school, describing the child's feelings of boredom, loneliness, and alienation from other children. Adopting the language of a typical school boy's view of the world, the speaker says, "Time in school drags along with so much worry / and waiting, things so dumb and stupid." The speaker contrasts this negative representation of school with the joy the child feels after school. When school lets out, the boy is free, the world now expansive and inviting. These feelings are illustrated in the images of leaping fountains and mysterious "woody places." However, even in his newfound freedom, the boy still feels odd, different from others. This difference is illustrated in the image of him walking oddly.

Stanza 2

In this stanza, the speaker foregrounds his point of view as someone looking back on childhood. He compares the "terror" of childhood with the "trust" of adulthood, as evoked in the images of men and women, a house and a dog, and both marvels at and grieves the change. Even though the poem is written from a third-person point of view and attempts to characterize the child's changing view of the world, the narrator is clearly present and makes his feelings known.

Stanza 3

The poem returns to images of childhood, this time to the boy playing at dusk, "as the light fades away." The "green place" is a descriptive metaphor for a park or a lawn. As dusk settles, an adult□ most likely a parent□grabs the hand of the boy and leads him away. The "oceanic vision that is fading" can refer to both the boy's disappointment at having to stop playing, and the speaker's sense of loss and pain in remembering his boyhood. The progression of the events in this stanza are typical of the events of a child's day.

Stanza 4

In this last stanza, the speaker compares fading childhood to the sailboat the child is playing with that sinks. The imagery here is dreamlike, underscoring the confusion of a child's mind and the place of memory itself. The "sails more beautiful / than yours" suggests people more beautiful and lives more beautiful than the child's and the narrator's. The "pale / narrow face" is the face of the child himself, and his puzzling about the future is also the speaker's mourning about the past. The poem ends with the child wondering where childhood will lead him.

Themes

Art

Rilke studied art history and was a lifelong lover of the visual arts, writing essays on sculptors and impressionist painters, living at a colony for painters, and even marrying a sculptor. In *The Book of Images*, he tried to create the verbal equivalent to a gallery full of paintings. In "Childhood," he uses imagery in much the same way as painters do. For example, he uses successive images of the child being anxious, then happy, and then mournful to illustrate the rapid emotional changes that occur in childhood. In the foreground are the child's experiences, and in the background is the speaker's commentary on those experiences. Just as a painter uses the technique of chiaroscuro to produce the illusion of depth, Rilke uses images of light and darkness to evoke emotional volatility and psychological depth.

Memory

For Rilke, memory is a tool used to unlock the mystery of human existence. The speaker alternates between describing the child's reactions to his surroundings with making statements commenting on those reactions. At the end of the third stanza, after describing the child playing and then being led home by an adult, the speaker writes, "Such oceanic vision that is fading, / such a constant worry, such weight." Statements such as these describe the state of mind of the adult speaker as much as they describe the state of mind of the child. The child is a younger version of Rilke himself, and by describing the child's confusion and feelings of alienation Rilke is, in fact, describing his own ongoing experiences of the same. In this way, he presents the relentless demands of memory as an affliction that the poet must exorcise *and* exercise.

Isolation

Although the child dreads the prison-like atmosphere of school and celebrates his freedom when the school days end by playing tag with others, he feels alone and is aware of how different he is from other children. This condition of otherness is a theme that runs throughout Rilke's poem and one he links to loneliness. Rilke evokes the feeling of loneliness both in imagery and statement. For example, in the second stanza, the adult speaker reflects on the child's being suddenly thrown into the adult world, lamenting, "What crazy mourning, what dream, what heaviness, / what deepness without end." In the last stanza, the boy, playing with a sailboat, worries about other boats that are better than his and contemplates the meaning of his life while gazing into a pond.

Style

Impressionism

Rilke describes emotions in this poem impressionistically. Impressionism seeks to depict scenes or characters by using concrete details to evoke subjective and sensory impressions, rather than to accurately depict an objective reality. For example, Rilke refers to the experience of the child's unbearable waiting for the school day to end as "lumpish time," and the place where he plays after school ends as "some green place." Writers who helped popularize impressionistic writing include Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce.

Juxtaposition

By using contrasting images and emotions, Rilke underscores the torment and fear that come with childhood. In one stanza, the child is lonely, bored, and anxious, but, in the next, he is full of light and life. In one stanza, he is terrified by the world he sees and then comforted by the sight of adults, a house, and a dog. Juxtaposing these emotions allows Rilke to get at the heart of his experience as a child and to show how the experience remains fresh in the adult speaker's mind.

Sound

Rilke uses a variety of sonic techniques to create his impressionistic effects. He uses alliteration in phrases such as "Dumpfen dingen" ("things so dumb and stupid") and "Welt so weit" ("world . . . so huge") to emphasize the imagery, and he uses assonance in phrases such as "kleinen steifen" ("small / puppety") and "O Traum, o Grauen" ("what dream, what heaviness") to focus the reader's attention on the emotion packed in the images.

Historical Context

In 1900, Rilke, disgusted by the industrialization of Europe's cities and the waning of communal life, traveled to Russia for the second time, with his friend Lou Andreas-Salome. There, he met writer Leo Tolstoy and attended numerous Russian religious services that, in their rituals and passion, instilled in Rilke a sense of the divine in humanity. Rilke was especially taken by the Russian peasants' conception of God, whom they saw not only in one another but also in everyday objects and even animals. Upon returning to Europe, Rilke joined an artists' colony in Worpswede, near Bremen, Germany, where he met his future wife, sculptor Clara Westhoff, and painter Paula Becker, who became a very close friend. At Worpswede, Rilke, already a student of art history, participated in discussions of art and philosophy and solidified his devotion to writing and his sense of himself as an artist. In his poems during this period, he attempted to use "painterly" techniques.

In 1902, when *The Book of Images*, which includes "Childhood," was published, Rilke traveled to Paris, commissioned to write a monograph about the sculptor Auguste Rodin. He was chosen to write the monograph because of his relationship to Westhoff, who was a student of Rodin's. Rodin had established a reputation as one of Europe's greatest artists, revolutionizing sculpture and modernizing it. In 1900, Rodin held a retrospective of his life's work at the Universal Exposition in Paris. In addition to Rodin's work, the Exposition, which was visited by more than fifty million people, featured the work of many artists associated with Art Nouveau, which was fast becoming the dominant style for urban architects and designers. Art Nouveau championed a return to nature and to the rural traditions of arts and crafts and rejected the academic and cerebral. Rodin's work habits and his emphasis on the materiality of his art greatly influenced Rilke, who began to rely more on discipline than inspiration for his writing, and who began crafting poems as tightly structured linguistic objects that drew attention to the words themselves as much as what they signified.

In European intellectual circles during this time, people increasingly discussed the theories of Sigmund Freud, who had published *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899 and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in 1901. Freud's explanation of dreams□where they come from, and how they work□made the concept of the unconscious subject matter for thinkers and artists throughout the twentieth century and influenced Rilke's own thinking about his childhood. In treating his patients, Freud noted that the topic of childhood seduction came up regularly. It was the repression of the individual's childhood desires□a son for his mother, a daughter for her father□that developed into neurotic symptoms in adulthood, Freud argued. Childhood was also the subject of the bestselling children's book of all time, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, authored by Beatrix Potter and published in 1902.

Rilke struggled financially during this time and restlessly traveled throughout Europe, to Worpswede, Italy, Scandinavia, Germany, and back to Paris, searching for a place that could accommodate both his need to write and his desire for authenticity in human interactions.

Critical Overview

Although "Childhood" is a frequently anthologized Rilke poem because of its accessibility and subject matter, very little criticism has been written on it or *The Book of Images*. Edward Snow, who has translated the volume in its entirety, claims in his introduction that this is because of the collection's "scattered, hybrid quality, which makes generalizing about it so difficult." The collection itself appeared twice, once in 1902 and again in 1906, in a much-expanded version. Although Snow notes that many of the poems are rough and do not live up to Rilke's later work, he claims, "In the most brilliant of the poems in *The Book of Images* . . . Rilke is uncannily confident from the first."

Writing on Rilke in *European Writers*, James Rolleston points out the significance of the collection in Rilke's development as an artist, noting that it "illuminates the continuity of Rilke's maturing process." Critic Frank Wood agrees. In his study of Rilke's poetry, *Rainer Maria Rilke: The Ring of Forms*, Wood claims the collection marks a transitional phase in Rilke's poetry. Comparing *The Book of Images* to *The Book of Hours*, written around the same time, Wood says, "[*The Book of Images*] contains some . . . really superb poems. . . . we are at least aware that a poet, and not a stylized monk, is speaking."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Semansky's essays and reviews appear regularly in journals and newspapers. In this essay, Semansky considers the tone of Rilke's poem and its relation to his other poems on childhood.

Rilke was obsessed with loss, with the presence of death in life. His writing is invariably dark, sad, elegiac. Elegies are laments written for the dead. However, Rilke's mourning was not limited to the dead. As someone who paid minute attention to the nuances of his own feelings, perceptions, and changes, Rilke also mourned the loss(es) of his previous selves. "Childhood" is representative in tone and theme of Rilke's poetry, as it laments both childhood and the passing of childhood.

It is impossible not to associate Rilke with the child in the poem. Rilke's own troubled childhood was fodder for so much of his writing. He insisted that it was only by being alone that one could truly be an artist, and Rilke made a life out of being alone. Like the child in the poem, who is engulfed in tortuously slow "lumpish time," waiting for his liberation from school, Rilke seemed to live waiting for his own death, chronicling the road to his impending demise. Time is the stuff that the poet swam in, the measuring stick he used to gauge his relationship to death, thus the speaker's repeated evocation of time throughout the poem.

It is normal for children to be attuned to time while in school. Their days are structured in periods, and the school day begins and ends at a certain hour. Enduring those hours, however, is often difficult, especially if the child already feels out of place in school, which Rilke did. In this sense, the time of childhood for Rilke stands in for the span of one's entire life, which has to be endured, witnessed daily. It is this witnessing of the body's inability to stop time's passing that causes the speaker to cry out, "Such marvelous time, such time passing on, / such loneliness." Time is "marvelous" because it is that which changes people and, without it, existence would be impossible. In this sense, the poet celebrates the passage of time, as he also mourns it.

Rilke is a different kind of witness. His vision goes deep into a thing, a moment, a memory, until he is able to distill its essence and characterize it in all of its complexities and intricacies. His style is so unique that critics often refer to a certain kind of lyric poem as "Rilkean," which means that it is often relentlessly self-conscious and that its insights are usually psychological. Knowing himself required constant witnessing to his past, and by choosing to represent his childhood in densely pictorial terms, Rilke is able to illustrate not only the jumble of conflicting emotions he experienced as a child but the continuing jumble of conflicting emotions he experienced as an adult. He evokes the sense of distance by repeatedly drawing attention to the difference between the child's inner and outer worlds□the frustration and anxiety he endures while in school and the joy he feels when out in the garden playing tag. The distance between the world of the adult speaker and the world of the child parallels the distance between the inner and outer worlds the child experiences.

As an impressionistic representation of his own childhood, the poem captures the complexities of growing up Rilke. The poet often described his childhood in less than flattering terms, noting that his mother sheltered him from others and so deferred his socialization and that his parents held each other in icy regard and eventually separated during his childhood. As an only child in Prague□ a city rife with tensions between Czechs and Germans□ Rilke was already an outsider. School simply increased his sense of alienation from others. In his biography of the poet, *Rilke: A Life*, Wolfgang Leppmann argues that for Rilke, coming to terms with his childhood was "one of the driving forces behind his literary production."

The drive to understand his childhood led Rilke to write numerous poems on the subject, and not surprisingly these poems sometimes reference one another. For example, a poem from his collection *New Poems*, also titled "Childhood," seems to directly address Rilke's attempt in *The Book of Images* to name the experience of childhood:

It would be good to give much thought, before
you try to find words for something so lost,
for those long childhood afternoons you knew
that vanished so completely□and why?

Just as Rilke addresses his childhood self in the earlier poem, so too he addresses a later incarnation of his self in this poem, creating a kind of poetic feedback loop that, potentially, can go on forever, or at least until he dies. Rilke stands out in modern poetry as a writer who elevated the self to an almost divine status and who took the darker side of his emotional life as the primary subject for his poems.

Rilke's obsession with the self and its permutations through time is in large part a result of his feeling of homelessness. A lifetime wanderer, he would spend a year in one place, a week in another, a month here or there. When he was not renting a cheap room in a run-down section of a city such as Paris, he would stay with wealthy patrons, often women. Place for Rilke was an interior space, populated by memories and a powerful desire to know himself. Geographically unmoored, Rilke sought stability in his dedication to his art.

Sometimes Rilke's excessive enthusiasm for self-knowledge intrudes into his poems, diluting their imagistic power. This happens in the "Childhood" of *The Book of Images*, where the narrator comments on the child's perceptions. By doing this, he makes explicit the speaker's presence and point of view toward the child. A more successful, though less anthologized, poem from *The Book of Images*, also on the subject of childhood, is "From a Childhood." In this much shorter poem, Rilke stays true to his desire to create a verbal snapshot of an event.

The darkness was a richness in the room
where the boy sat, hidden, by himself.
And when the mother entered, as in a dream,
a thin glass trembled on the silent shelf.

She felt as if the room had betrayed her, but
she kissed her boy and murmured: Are you here?
Then both glanced shyly at the dark clavier,
for often in the evening she would sing
a song in which the child was strangely caught.

He sat so quietly, his gaze bent low
upon her hands, weighed down with heavy rings,
moving along the white keys as men go
heavily through the deep drifts of snow.

In this poem, there is no editorializing speaker punctuating the description. The images themselves tell readers everything they need to know about the relationship between the child and his mother. The last image of the poem, in which the boy plays with his sailboat and gazes into the pond, evokes a reality beyond that which one normally sees. Such an image is used to fuse the experience of the poet's inner self with his outer world. Poets rely on association and intuition, rather than rational thought processes to evoke meaning and emotion. The surrealists refined the use of the deep image, and it gained popularity again in the 1960s in the poetry of Robert Bly, Mark Strand, W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, and William Stafford. Not surprisingly, most of these poets have translated Rilke, "updating" his work for the late twentieth- century sensibility.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Childhood," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Pool is a published poet and reviewer and teaches advanced placement and international baccalaureate English. In this essay, Pool compares Rilke to impressionist painters and discusses problems of poetry in translation.

Rilke's poem "Childhood" appears in a collection that can be translated in English as *The Book of Images*, or, in an alternative translation, as *The Book of Pictures*. This collection was published twice, first in 1902 and later in an expanded version in 1906. As Edward Snow writes in his translation of Rilke's *The Book of Images*, the poems in this volume "tend to epitomize what it means to characterize . . . a mood, a stance, a cadence, a quality of voice, a way of looking" as typical of the poet. This poem is one of many images in the book; it is an image of childhood, looked upon from the perspective adulthood. It is a reflection in later life on powerful emotions from the poet's childhood and is similar to the work of such romantic poets as William Wordsworth. "Childhood" is a period piece about Rilke's childhood, and it participates in the impressionist movement that Rilke, under the influence of Parisian art and the sculptor Rodin, took part in during this time.

The impressionists were a group of artists in France and Germany near the end of the nineteenth century. The movement derives its name from the artistic movement founded by Monet with his painting called "Impression: Sunrise." With the advent of photography, artistic realism seemed to have been superseded by technology. The impressionists created an art in which light and colors dominated the canvas. Lines between forms were less distinct than before and, in fact, took on a blurry kind of existence. With respect to writers, impressionism made itself felt partly as poets began to explore the sensuality and eroticism of the unconscious. They also used words charged with sensory impressions, something Robert Bly in his translation of "Childhood" expresses in English as "lights and colors and noises; / water leaps out of fountains into the air, / and the world is so huge in the woody places."

A major key to understanding the intent of the poem lies in the German word *bild*, which means not only a literal picture, portrait, or visual representation but also an image as metaphor that points beyond itself. Snow says, "*bilder* in this sense can populate the visual realm with traces, invisible connections, imaginings, remembrances, intimations of things lost or unrealized, waiting to be recalled or brought (back) to life." It is as an image of a lost childhood, dually and simultaneously typical and unique, that this poem appears.

The poem begins with a confusion of opposites, with the first three lines expressing the boredom and *ennui* that even good students sometimes feel about school. Then, there is a sudden shift, and there is action, colors, noises, and the blooming, buzzing eruption and enlargement of the world that a child leaving the classroom and going out to play experiences.

Rilke alternates between narration and meditation in each stanza. He presents impressions of color and light, much as an impressionist painter might. Such lines as "children's bright colors make them stand out" and "in some green place as the light fades away" suggest the verbal equivalent of a painting. Yet, Rilke concludes each stanza, in a sort of parallel structure, with meditation on the images. Bly's translation works to be colloquial in modern English, but it neglects some of the explicit parallelism of the German, a parallelism that is caught in other translations.

Ultimately, a serious student of poetry in translation must make some effort to see what the poem must say either in the original or by comparing various translations to see what each of them seems to capture and how the translations diverge. With Rilke, the comparison is relatively easy because there are many translations of his work. Why do different translators continue to visit and revisit Rilke? As William H. Gass says in his book *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation*, many translators have

> . . . blunted their skills against his obdurate, complex, and compacted poems, poems displaying an orator's theatrical power, while remaining as suited to a chamber and its music as a harpsichord: made of plucked tough sounds, yet as rapid and light and fragile as fountain water.

In looking at the Bly translation and comparing it to the original, one fact stands out: Rilke's poem rhymes, and Bly's translation does not. Some translators of Rilke try to preserve the rhyme. Leishman produces rhymed translation, while Snow does not. Bly, in his *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, thoughtfully provides the German original on facing pages, as does Snow in his translation of *The Book of Images*. Looking at the German, even if one does not fully understand the language, can help one see the structures and repetitions in the original with which any translator must struggle.

In the original German, the poem's unification is enhanced by use of the interjection "O" plus a noun, repeated several times at the end of each of the four stanzas. The reader is forced to look at these nouns to see how they apply to the general theme of childhood. These combinations have positive, negative, or neutral connotations. For example, "Such marvelous time, such time passing on, / such loneliness" presents an immediate contrast at the end of the first stanza. In general, these parallel structures tend toward a sense of melancholy and gravity. Such words as "loneliness," "heaviness," "deepness," "worry," and "weight" express the poet's meditations on the images of childhood. It turns out that the meditations are much more somber than the images are. Perhaps Rilke reflects on childhood in tranquility, but he does not do so without anxiety.

In Bly's translation, he replaces the word "O," a word conspicuously absent in current American usage, with a variety of terms, such as "such," and "what" and, in both the first and last stanza, the less-elevated "oh." Bly's alterations of Rilke's original use of the "O" forms syntactical structures that are more pleasing to the contemporary ear, yet the parallelism that is evident in the original, as well as in Leishman's and Snow's

translations, gets weakened in Bly's. Different readers may have diverse responses to Bly's translation; some readers enjoy Rilke's mastery of rhyme and structure, whereas others may find it too different from modern poetry to enjoy.

Rilke wrote in his *Letters to a Young Poet*,

. . . even if you were in a prison whose walls allowed
none of the sounds of the world to reach your senses,
would you not still have always your childhood, that
precious, royal richness, that treasure house of memories?
Turn your attention there.

In this poem, it is not immediately clear whether childhood is a happy time period for Rilke. There are certainly idyllic moments in this poem. The sudden release of a child from school, the joys of parks and games of tag, and dogs and sailboats all seem to be perfect images of an idealized childhood. Indeed, these images seem to be metaphors for a safe, orderly, self-satisfied life. Yet Rilke is far from satisfied. Childhood recedes from him, eternally and inexorably. His last two lines say (in Bly's translation) "oh childhood, what was us going away / going where? Where?" Snow translates the same conclusion as "O childhood, O likeness gliding off / To where? To where?" In this instance, it seems that Snow has the better of it, in that his translation catches the sense of the German *entgleitende*, etymologically related to the English "glide," as well as *vergleiche*, which means "simile," "likeness," or "comparison." One must remember that this is a book of images, which are themselves metaphors. This likeness, which remains unnamed, is the ineffable mysteriousness of existence that the poet senses in meditating on his own childhood.

Rilke begins as something of an impressionist, but he puts his own distance and anxieties into this poem. Kathleen L. Komar, writing in the *Germanic Review* says "Renunciation and absence . . . take on a positive creative value for Rilke." It is to the constantly gliding-away past that he turns his attention in "Childhood." Like much of Rilke's work, this is a poem of depth and serious intent. It appeals because of its language, because of its formal structure. Unfortunately, Bly's translation cannot convey these elements. It is only through comparison with other translations that one can see the linguistic richness of the poem. In addition to the linguistic wealth, there is a universality in this poem. Far from being sentimental and conventional, it utilizes images of a fairly typical late nineteenth- century, middle-class childhood to convey something of the depth of the poet's perception. Many people find their childhood escaping them, and yet they cannot let them go. Such a duality, a desire to fix fluid memories in place is characteristic of a life of spirit and mind and perception. Rilke's poem evokes the creative spirit that many people have. It is through such poems that Rilke has gained an enduring reputation.

Source: Frank Pool, Critical Essay on "Childhood," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Schoolfield discusses Rilke's personal history and how it affected his writing.

Rainer Maria Rilke is one of the major poets of twentieth-century literature. In the collections with which his early verse culminates, *Das Buch der Bilder* (The Book of Pictures, 1902; enlarged, 1906) and *Das Stunden-Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom mönchischen Leben: Von der Pilgerschaft: Von der Armuth und vom Tode* (1905; translated as *The Book of Hours; Comprising the Three Books: of the Monastic Life, of Pilgrimage, of Poverty and Death*, 1961), he appears as a creator or discoverer of legends□his own and history's□ and, particularly in the latter work, as a special brand of mystic. With the poems of his middle years, *Neue Gedichte* (1907-1908; translated as *New Poems*, 1964), he is an expert instructor in the art of "seeing" as well as a guide through Europe's cultural sites just before the onslaught of general war and, subsequently, mass tourism. Because of statements in *Duineser Elegien* (1923; translated as *Elegies from the Castle of Duino*, 1931) and *Die Sonette an Orpheus* (1923; translated as *Sonnets to Orpheus*, 1936) on the limitations and possibilities of the human condition, he has become something of a teacher and consoler to readers aware of the fragility and the potential of man. Long the prey of cultists and often obscure exegetes and regarded as the bearer of a "message" or "messages," he has more recently been seen as a brilliant verse tactician whose visions may be more original in their manner of perception than in their philosophical core. His novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910; translated as *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1930) was initially received as a belated product of European decadence or as an autobiographical document (neither opinion is wholly off the mark); later it was identified as a striking example of the "crisis of subjectivity and its influences on the traditional possibilities of narration," in Judith Ryan's formulation. Of all Rilke's works, the large body of stories he wrote has received the least attention; as a mature artist he himself grew condescending when he occasionally mentioned them in his letters□in striking contrast to *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, which he continued to praise and explicate until his death. These tales and sketches, some seventy of them, fall into the beginning of his career, before the changes that took place in his life and production in the years from 1902 to 1905.

Rilke's attitudes toward Prague, where he was born René Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria Rilke on 4 December 1875, were mixed, as were those toward his parents. His father, Josef, was a former warrant officer in the Austrian army who at the time of Rilke's birth was a railroad official□a job perhaps owed to the influence of Josef's well-to-do elder brother, Jaroslav. His mother, Sophie (Phia) Entz Rilke, homely and socially ambitious, was the daughter of a perfume manufacturer. Rilke was their only child; a daughter, born before him, had survived only a few days. The parents were divorced before Rilke's childhood was past. The epistolary evidence indicates that Rilke was devoted to his father, who was simple, gregarious, and a lady's man, but saw rather little of him, and that he nearly detested his mother; yet it was the latter who encouraged his literary ambitions. The complexity of his feelings for his mother may be indicated in his

early verse and stories by the appearance of a dream mother, lovely and even desirable; his reaction to Phia's bigoted Roman Catholicism, the faith in which he was reared, is reflected both in the ambiguous allusions to a Roman Catholic world in his early verse and *Das Marien-Leben* (1913; translated as *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, 1921) and in his much-proclaimed dislike of Christianity. Rilke's snobbery, which led him to cling obstinately to a family saga of age-old nobility, was encouraged by the genealogical researches of his uncle Jaroslav and by his mother's pretensions and prejudices; Phia Rilke was distinguished by her sense of extraordinary refinement and by her contempt for Jews and Czech speakers. Both the Rilkes and the Entzes were "Prague Germans," aware that they were up against an ever more aggressive Slavic majority in a city where German speakers were confronted, as the century wore on, by the rapid weakening of their social and political position.

At ten, after an elementary education, much interrupted by real or fancied illness, with the Piarist Brothers, Rilke was sent to the military school at Sankt Pölten in Lower Austria; save for summer vacations he remained there until 1890, when he was transferred to the military upper school at Mährisch-Weißkirchen in Moravia. The abrupt change from the cosseted existence at home to regimented boarding-school life cannot have been pleasant, even though his teachers encouraged him to read his poems aloud to his fellow students. As a young man Rilke planned to free himself from "jenes böse und bange Jahrfünf" (that evil and frightened half-decade) by writing a militaryschool novel, and in a letter of 1920 he made an extremely harsh reply to Major General von Sedlakowitz, his German teacher at Sankt Pölten, who had written to congratulate him on his fame: "Als ich in besonneneren Jahren . . . Dostojewskis Memoiren aus einem Toten-Hause zuerst in die Hände bekam, da wollte es mir scheinen, daßich in alle Schrecknisse und Verzweifelungen des Bagno seit meinem zehnen Jahre eingelassen gewesen sei" (When, in years of greater reflection . . . I first got hold of Dostoyevski's *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, it seemed to me that I had been exposed to all the terrors and despairs of the prison camp from my tenth year on). After not quite a full year at the second school, from which he emerged, he told Sedlakowitz, "ein Erschöpfter, körperlich und geistig Mißbrauchter" (exhausted, abused in body and soul), he was discharged for reasons of health and went back to Prague□only to show off by wearing his cadet's uniform and bragging about a future return to the colors. His uncle Jaroslav then sent him to a commercial academy at Linz, an experience about which he later wrote that investigations were pointless, since he had not been himself at the time. Recent research indicates that he was a would-be bon vivant who persuaded a children's nurse to run away with him to a hotel in Vienna.

In 1892 Jaroslav agreed to finance private instruction leading to the qualifying examination at Prague's German Charles-Ferdinand University, so that one day Rilke could take over his uncle's law firm. Not that Jaroslav was at all confident about the boy's future: "Renés Phantasie ist ein Erbteil seiner Mutter und durch ihren Einfluß, von Hause aus krankhaft angeregt, durch unsystematisches Lesen allerhand Bücher überheizt□[ist] seine Eitelkeit durch vorzeitiges Lob erregt" (René's imagination is an inheritance from his mother, abnormally excited through her influence from the very beginning, overheated by the unsystematic reading of all sorts of books□his vanity has been aroused by premature praise). Tutorial instruction was congenial to Rilke's

temperament; by 1895 he was ready to matriculate. He was already avidly seeking an audience—his unbearably sentimental first book, *Leben und Lieder: Bilder und Tagebuchblätter* (Life and Songs), had come out in 1894, dedicated to Valerie David-Rhonfeld, the niece of the Czech poet Julius Zeyer (Valerie had financed the book's publication). The twenty-one artificially simple poems of *Wegwarten* (Wild Chicory) appeared in January 1896. At the end of the summer of 1896 he moved to Munich, ostensibly for art history studies but with an eye to the cultural and publishing opportunities afforded by the Bavarian capital, which was then Berlin's equal as an artistic center. By this time he had considerably better proof of his lyric talent to display: *Larenopfer* (Offering to the Lares, 1896), with its tributes to Prague, was followed by *Traumgekrönt: Neue Gedichte* (Crowned with Dreams, 1897), containing some turgid but striking erotic poems, and he was already a busy contributor to popular journals.

Some of Rilke's Munich acquaintanceships were plainly meant to further his career—for example, that with the dramatist Max Halbe. (Rilke's naturalistic drama *Im Frühfrost: Ein Stück Dämmerung. Drei Vorgänge* [1897; translated as *Early Frost* in *Nine Plays*, 1979] was produced in Prague in July 1897 with the young Max Reinhardt in the role of the weak father.) Others were more important: the novelist Jakob Wassermann introduced him to the Danish author whose works became his vade mecum, Jens Peter Jacobsen. Another young friend, Nathan Sulzberger from New York, provided him with a second major object of cultural devotion: in March 1897, at Sulzberger's invitation, he visited Venice for the first time. He spent an April vacation on Lake Constance with "the mad countess," Franziska zu Reventlow, who was pregnant with another man's child; and in May 1897 he met Lou Andreas-Salomé, fifteen years his senior, the author and former friend of Nietzsche, and the wife (in name only, it would seem) of the Iranian scholar Friedrich Carl Andreas. The summer Lou and Rilke spent at Wolfratshausen in the Bavarian Alps wrought remarkable changes in him: he altered his name from René to Rainer, his handwriting became firmer and clearer, and he gathered his passionate love poetry to Lou into the manuscript collection "Dir zur Feier" (In Celebration of You), which, at her request, he did not publish. (The title, transmuted into *Mir zur Feier: Gedichte* [In Celebration of Me], was used for a book of verse in 1899.) Some of these poems, estimated to have been about one hundred in number, were subsumed into published collections; others survived only in manuscript; others were destroyed. How long Lou and Rainer remained lovers is not known, but Rilke followed her and her husband to Berlin in the autumn of 1897.

The Prussian capital remained Rilke's home until the new century. His stay there was interrupted by trips that were to be of major importance for his poetic development: a springtime journey to Italy in 1898 (his verse play *Die weiße Fürstin* [published in *Mir zur Feier: Gedichte*; translated as *The White Princess in Nine Plays*, 1979] grew out of a stay at Viareggio); an excursion to Russia from April to June 1899 in the company of the Andreases; and a second and much more carefully prepared Russian trip from May to August 1900, again with Lou but without her husband. Rilke—who had learned Russian easily and quickly on the basis of his school training in Czech—visited the peasant poet Spiridon Drozhzhin and had an uncomfortable interview with Leo Tolstoy at his estate, Yasnaya Polyana. The Russian experience under the tutelage of Lou, a native of Saint Petersburg, provided him with new poetic material: following a fad of the time, he

professed a mystic love for the great land in the east; he read its literature carefully and used Russian themes in the poems in *Das Buch der Bilder* and *Das Stunden- Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom mönchischen Leben: Von der Pilgerschaft: Von der Armuth und vom Tode*, in his tales, and in *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. During a latesummer stay with the artist Heinrich Vogeler in the artists' colony at Worpswede, near Bremen, after his return from Russia, he wore a Russian peasant's blouse and a large Greek cross. In Worpswede, thus attired, he met the painter and sculptress Paula Becker and the sculptress Clara Westhoff. Rejected by Paula, he turned his affection to her statuesque friend. On 28 April 1901 Rilke and Clara were married.

The affair with Lou had been broken off, but their years together had been enormously productive for Rilke. Some of the poems in *Advent* (1898) are from the Wolfratshausen summer; Rilke came to regard *Mir zur Feier: Gedichte* as the first of his "admissible" books; his career as a dramatist had been encouraged by the publication of *Ohne Gegenwart: Drama in zwei Akten* (1898; translated as *Not Present* in *Nine Plays,* 1979), with its Maeterlinckian suggestions of ineffable fears, but it concluded disastrously with *Das tägliche Leben: Drama in zwei Akten* (1902; translated as *Everyday Life* in *Nine Plays*, 1979), a play written in 1900 about a painter caught between two loves. Produced at the Residenz Theater in Berlin in December 1901, it was greeted with laughter: Rilke resolved never to try the stage again.

The writing of stories had occupied much of Rilke's time: a first collection, *Am Leben hin: Novellen und Skizzen* (Along Life's Course), had appeared in 1898. The book contains eleven tales, six of which can be identified as having been finished at Wolfratshausen during the summer with Lou. Some of the tales suffer from the mawkishness that beset Rilke during his early years, whether he was writing poems, plays, or narratives. In "Greise" (Old Men) a little girl brings a flower to her grandfather as he sits on a park bench. Other old men watch; one of them, Pepi, spits contemptuously as his companion, Christoph, picks up some stray blossoms from the street and carries them back to the poorhouse. Yet Pepi puts a glass of water on the windowsill of their room, waiting in the darkest corner for Christoph to place the scruffy bouquet in it. In "Das Christkind" (The Christ Child) a little girl, mistreated by her stepmother, takes the money her father has slipped to her as a Christmas gift, buys some paper ornaments, and adorns a young fir tree with them; then she lies down in the forest to die, imagining that she is in her mother's lap. Here Rilke ventures into a maudlin realm long since cultivated by certain nineteenth-century masters; in fact, he identifies one of them: in Elisabeth's dying dreams, "Die Mutter [war] schön, wie die Fee im Märchen von Andersen" (The mother [was] beautiful, like the fairy in the tale of Andersen). In "Weißes Glück" (White Happiness) a tubercular girl tells her sad life story to another traveler, a man hoping for erotic adventure at a railroad station in the middle of the night. A blind girl has a beautiful voice but will live out her life unloved in "Die Stimme" (The Voice). Gypsies fight over a girl, and the stronger, Král, slays the boyish flute player in "Kismet."

With such stories, save for his awareness of language and a certain psychological refinement, Rilke does not rise much above the level of, say, another popular writer from

Prague, Ossip Schubin (pseudonym of Aloisia Kirschner, 1854-1934). Yet there are flashes of a brilliant satiric gift in the depiction of a moribund Prague-German family in "Das Familienfest" (The Family Festival) and "Sterbetag" (Death Day), and evidence of a keen insight into human relations in "Das Geheimnis" (The Secret), about the romantic dreams of two old maids, and "Die Flucht" (The Flight), about a schoolboy's plans for an escapade with a young girl and his failure□not hers□to carry through with them. In "Alle in Einer" (All in One Woman) Rilke shows a penchant for the shocking and the horrible which he shared with other Prague writers such as Gustav Meyrink and Paul Leppin: tormented by passion, a lame woodcarver makes one image after another of the same girl, until he ends by hacking at his own hands. The concluding story, "Einig" (United), has autobiographical tones: a son with artistic ambitions has returned home ill to his pious mother. It is spoiled by a contrived happy ending□ each learns that the other has been sending money to the family's estranged father□but it offers a nice specimen for students of the Ibsen craze in Germany around the turn of the century: like Oswald in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), Gerhard says that he is a "wurmfaule Frucht" (worm-eaten fruit), recalling Oswald's famous description of himself as "vermoulu," and claims that his illness has been bestowed upon him by his father.

Zwei Prager Geschichten (Two Prague Stories, 1899) was composed at Berlin-Schmargendorf in 1897-1898. The foreword says: "Dieses Buch ist lauter Vergangenheit. Heimat und Kindheit□ beide längst fern□sind sein Hintergrund" (This book is nothing but the past. Homeland and childhood□ both far removed, long since□are its background). The two lengthy stories, however, have little to do with the Prague Rilke had known; rather, they take place in Czech milieus and are expressions of Rilke's brief flaring-up of interest in Czech nationalism (other evidence is to be found in *Larenopfer*). No doubt Rilke was also aware of the interest of German publishers and their public in Prague's semi-exotic world: Karl Hans Strobl (1877-1946), for example, launched his long career as a popular author by writing about the city and the tensions between its language groups. "König Bohusch" (King Bohusch) uses Prague's Czech-speaking artistic circles as a contrasting background for two outsiders who are far more energetic and tormented than the ineffectual aesthetes, actors, and dandies of the city's cafés: the student Rezek, detesting both German speakers and the Austrian government, organizes a terrorist band; Bohusch, a hunchback, loves his "Mütterchen" (little mother), Prague, and dreams of an affair with the prostitute Frantischka. Familiar with the city's nooks and crannies, the self-important Bohusch shows Rezek a hiding place for the latter's group; simultaneously, he falls into fantasies of his own power. The police capture all the plotters save Rezek, who kills the poor, addled Bohusch because he suspects him of betraying the gang to the authorities. In fact, it was Frantischka who did so; her high-minded sister, Carla, is a member of Rezek's group. Based on actual events in the Prague of Rilke's youth, the story is an attempt to provide a dispassionate view of what, for Rilke, was an alien world, however close at hand.

More loosely constructed, "Die Geschwister" (The Siblings) looks sympathetically at a Czech family that has moved to the capital from the countryside. The son, Zdenko, is at the university; the mother does washing for the arrogant German speakers, Colonel and Mrs. Meering von Meerhelm, the depiction of whom may be the most convincing part of the story. Zdenko takes up with the radical circles around Rezek, who is carried over

from "König Bohusch," but dies of illness before he can be forced to participate in their activities. The daughter, Louisa, has aroused the interest of Rezek but falls in love with Ernst Land, a young Bohemian-German who rents the late Zdenko's room and stays on after the death of Louisa's mother. By the end it is plain that the Czech and the German, the representatives of two hostile camps, will marry. The simple plot is drawn out by allusions to Bohemia's history, especially to the legends surrounding Julius Caesar, the vicious illegitimate son of Rudolf II who was said to have driven a girl to her death as he attempted to rape her during a masked ball at Krummau Castle. Rilke describes the Daliborka, the "hunger tower" on the Hradany, later to serve as the setting for the love and conspiratorial scenes in Gustav Meyrink's *Walpurgisnacht* (1917). These tidbits are not just window dressing but are used by Rilke in an attempt at psychological portraiture. Louisa mingles the tale of Julius Caesar with her impressions of Rezek: "Und sie konnte ihm nicht wehren, daß er auch in ihre Träume wuchs und endlich eines wurde mit dem dunklen Prinzen des alten Maskentraumes und nun für sie nicht mehr Rezek sondern Julius Cäsar hieß" (And she could not prevent him from entering into her dreams and finally becoming one with the dark prince of the old dream of the masked ball, and now for her he was no longer Rezek but Julius Caesar). When Zdenko, Rezek, and Louisa visit the Daliborka, the obsessive thought returns, and she imagines herself naked, fleeing before the advances of Julius Caesar. Her rescue from these fantasies by the calm presence of Land may indicate that Rilke naively thought his Czech compatriots could be saved from the destructive allure of a Rezek by good-natured German liberalism.

Plainly, Rilke is fascinated by sexuality; but he often shies away from addressing it directly. (One of the most linguistically tortuous and emotionally tormented poems in the whole of his work is "Das Bett" [The Bed] in *Neue Gedichte*.) It is surprising that in the title tale of his third story collection, *Die Letzten* (The Last, 1902), written in 1898-1899 under Lou's aegis, he can be as frank as he is in discussing a taboo theme: mother-son incest. (*Die Letzten* was the first of Rilke's books to be published by the Dane Axel Juncker, who shared, Rilke believed, his own interest in the physical makeup of books: a "quiet" text merited "quiet" and elegant printing and binding.) The first story, "Im Gespräch" (In Conversation), records the talk of a group of artists in the salon of the Princess Helena Pavlovna at Venice. The speakers each have roles to play: the German painter is clumsy and loud, the gentleman from Vienna (a city Rilke, from provincial Prague, especially disliked) speaks with empty elegance, the Frenchman Count Saint-Quentin is still and polite, and the Pole Kasimir is the mouthpiece for Rilke's theories of artistic creation: "'Kunst ist Kindheit nämlich. Kunst heißt, nicht wissen, daß die Welt schon *ist*, und eine machen. Nicht zerstören, was man vorfindet, sondern einfach nichts Fertiges finden'" ("Art is childhood, you see. Art means not knowing that the world already *is*, and making [one]. Not destroying what one finds but rather simply not finding something finished"). Turning to the princess, Kasimir quotes her: "'Man muß, sagen Sie, dort muß man anfangen, wo Gott abließ, wo er müde wurde'" ("One must, you say, one must begin there where God left off, where He became tired"). At the end, having almost found a kindred soul, the Pole leaves, "wie einer der nicht wiederkommen wird an einen lieben Ort" (like someone who will not return to a beloved place).

A sensitive man is the central figure in the next story, "Der Liebende" (The Lover). The fragile Ernst Bang (his last name may allude to the adjective *bang* [anxious, afraid] or the Danish writer Herman Bang, whose works Rilke deeply admired) talks with his friend, the vigorous Hermann Holzer. Like Král in "Kismet," Holzer shuts out the light with his "schwarzen Rücken" (black silhouette; in Král's case it was "breite schwere Schultern" [broad, heavy shoulders]). Bang is in love with Helene, whom Holzer is going to marry; after many pauses (Rilke was captivated by Maeterlinck's use of silences onstage), Bang summons the courage to tell Holzer that the latter will destroy Helene with his clumsy affection: "'Nimm mir's nicht übel, Hermann, aber . . . du . . . zerbrichst . . . sie. . . .' Pause" ("Don't take it amiss, Hermann, but . . . you . . . will shatter her . . ." Pause). The difficult conversation drifts along; affable and even respectful, Holzer asks what Bang thinks he should do. "'Sprich, die ganze Kultur steht hinter dir, bedenke'" ("Speak up□remember, the whole culture stands behind you"). The struggle may be not so much between two lovers of the same woman as between the subtle heir to an ancient tradition and the bluff bearer of contemporary strength: Holzer is a peasant's son and has his father's qualities□ "Sowas Grades, Eichenes" (something straightforward, oaken). The juxtaposition of the two types is a common one in the fin de siècle, with its sense of the ending of an old Europe and the beginning of a less nuanced world. Helene enters, learns of the conversation, and weeps; taking her on his lap, Holzer tries to console her as she turns pale. The melodrama is obvious: she will stay with Holzer, but both she and Ernst know how sad her fate will be. Rilke's sympathy, however, is not wholly on the side of Bang and Helene; regarding himself as the spokesman of beleaguered refinement, he still looks with some admiration and envy at what is young and fresh and vigorous.

As Rezek turns up both in "König Bohusch" and "Die Geschwister," so an apparent relative of Hermann Holzer appears as the third person in the title story, "Die Letzten." Marie Holzer's grandfather was a peasant; more self-aware than Hermann, she has a sense of being "jünger in der Kultur" (younger in culture) than the members of the impoverished noble family to which she has become attached. She is engaged to Harald Malcorn, whom she met at a gathering of social reformers where he was the impassioned speaker. Now she and Harald's mother await his return from another speaking engagement amid the Malcorns' "Dinge" (things□a word to which Rilke attaches much significance), the great age of which Marie respects and yet cannot quite comprehend. Almost maternally concerned for little Frau Malcorn's well-being, Marie nonetheless senses a rival in the widow, and their competition for Harald comes to the surface in a long stichomythia. Returning home exhausted and ill, Harald decides to abandon his agitator's calling: he breaks with Marie and places himself in his mother's care.

In the story's second part the convalescent Harald and his mother talk of going to an uncle's estate, Skal; but the plan is dropped, in part because of a family curse: the death of a family member has always been presaged by the appearance of a "dame blanche," Frau Walpurga, at the castles the family once owned, and most frequently at Skal. Harald tells his mother about his misty notions of becoming an artist; after recalling circumstances that point to Frau Malcorn's having had a lover long ago and to his own role as a childish and unwitting surrogate for the lover, and after recalling his reaction to

his father ("Er hatte einen dichten weißen Bart. Er war alt'" ["He had a heavy white beard. He was old"]), Harald entices his mother into adorning herself like a bride: together they will celebrate a festival of beauty. Frau Malcorn reappears in a white dress, and Harald collapses; hitherto the room has been illuminated only by moonlight, but now someone lights a light, and the reader sees a terrifying tableau: "Harald sitzt entstellt in den Kissen, den Kopf noch vorgestreckt, mit herabhängenden Händen. Und vor ihm steht Frau Malcorn, welk, in Atlas, mit Handschuhen. Und sie sehen sich mit fremdem Entsetzen in die toten Augen" (Harald sits distorted in his cushions, his head still stretched forward, with his hands hanging down. And Frau Malcorn stands before him, withered, in satin, with her gloves. And they gaze into one another's dead eyes with strange horror).

"Die Letzten" is a grotesque and fascinating melange of themes: the "last of the line," unable to create the art that might have been born of his sensitivity; the mother who is led into a fatal attempt to recover her lost youth; the well-meaning outsider, "healthier" than the inhabitants of the old world to which she is drawn. The literary echoes are many: Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Maeterlinck (the numerous pauses, the subtle anxiety), Jacobsen (Frau Malcorn's *nom d'amour* is Edel, reminiscent of Edele Lyhne, the aunt of whom the adolescent Niels Lyhne becomes enamored in the novel *Niels Lyhne* [1880; translated, 1919]), the Gothic tale. What were Rilke's intentions with the story, which comes dangerously close to unintentional comedy with its "white lady" and its family curse? Did he mean to write a *conte cruel* to vie with the most exaggerated specimens of contemporary decadent literature? The decadent apparatus is plainly on display: the ancient family, incestuous eroticism, a shocking close. Did he intend to plumb the depths of an erotic mother-son relationship of whose existence he was aware in his own case (the psychiatrist Erich Simenauer thinks so) and then mix these personal problems with his theories on the creation of art? Does the story (as Egon Schwarz believes) show the young Rilke's swerve away from the social concerns with which he had flirted to the aesthetic vision of life he subsequently and adamantly maintained? "Die Letzten" is one of Rilke's most tantalizing works, a bizarre conclusion to his early fiction.

In the years between the start of his career in Prague and his removal from Berlin-Schmargendorf and the ambience of Lou in February 1901, Rilke wrote some thirty other tales and sketches: some of these appeared in journals; others were never printed during his lifetime. Exaggerated and often banal effects are common: in a painful specimen of naturalism, "Die Näherin" (The Seamstress, first published in volume 4 of Rilke's *Sämtliche Werke* [Collected Works] in 1961), the narrator is seduced by a lonely and physically unattractive woman; in the lachrymose "Die goldene Kiste" (The Golden Chest, 1895) little Willy admires a golden chest in an undertaker's window, and his dying words express his desire to be laid to rest in it; a beautiful girl is the victim of brain damage in "Eine Tote" (A Dead Girl, 1896); a wife kills herself so that her husband can devote himself fully to his art in "Ihr Opfer" (Her Sacrifice, 1896); a tubercular girl is used and then forgotten, after her death, by a robust male in "Heiliger Frühling" (Holy Spring, 1897); the young bride of a jovial and hearty older man falls in love with her husband's willowy and melancholy son in "Das Lachen des Pán Mráz" (The Laughter of Pán Mráz, 1899); the story of the masked ball at Krummau Castle from "Die Geschwister" is retold in "Masken" (Masks, 1898); a mother loves her son too well in "Leise Begleitung" (Soft

Accompaniment, 1898) and vicariously experiences his disappointment in a love affair with a girl of his own age as she sits beside her unfeeling husband. There are stunted figures: the emotionally frigid man searching for an "event" in "Das Ereignis" (The Event, published in *Todtentänze: Zwielicht-Skizzen aus unseren Tagen* [Dances of Death, 1896]); the doctrinaire Nietzschean in "Der Apostel" (The Apostle, 1896); the dreamy would-be artist in "Wladimir, der Wolkenmaler" (Wladimir the Cloud-Painter, 1899)□in "Die Letzten," Harald planned to paint clouds, a subject quickly transmuted into his mother, clad in her white dress. Attempts are made at comedy: in "Teufelsspuk" (Devilment, 1899) the new owners of the estate of Gross-Rohozec are terrified by what they think is the castle ghost, but it is merely the former owner, a nobleman, who□slightly intoxicated□has groped his way back to his family's previous possessions. The story might seem to have anti-Semitic overtones, since the buyers of the castle are Jewish and Rilke implies that they are somehow ennobled by their midnight contact with nobility."Teufelsspuk" was printed in the Munich journal *Simplicissimus* and intended for inclusion in a new volume of novellas Rilke outlined for the publisher Bonz in the summer of 1899; nothing came of the project.

Some of Rilke's best tales are autobiographical. One of the stories unpublished during his lifetime is "Pierre Dumont" (first published in Carl Sieber's biography *René Rilke*, 1932), about a boy parting from his mother at the military school's gate. Another is *Ewald Tragy* (written, 1898; published, 1929; translated, 1958), a long story in two parts about a watershed in the life of a young man. The first half consists of the cruel yet somehow affectionate depiction of his last dinner with the members of his Prague family (made up mainly of desiccated oldsters and eccentrics) and his difficult relation with his father, the bestower of uncomprehending love; in the second, Ewald moves away to the loneliness and freedom of Munich. "Die Turnstunde" (The Exercise Hour), published in *Die Zukunft* in 1902, pays painfully accurate attention to the petty obscenities and large emotional deformations of adolescence. Little Krix tells Jerome, Rilke's alter ego, that he has beheld the body of Gruber, a boy who had died during gymnastics: "'Ich hab ihn gesehen,' flüstert er atemlos und preßt Jeromes Arm und ein Lachen ist innen in ihm und rüttelt ihn hin und her. Er kann kaum weiter: 'Ganz nackt ist er und eingefallen und ganz lang. Und an den Fußsohlen ist er versiegelt. . . .' Und dann kichert er, spitz und kitzlich, kichert und beißt sich in den Ärmel Jeromes hinein" ("I have seen him," he whispers breathlessly and presses Jerome's arm and a laughter is within him and shakes him back and forth. He can scarcely continue: "He's all naked and collapsed and very long. And there are wax seals on the soles of his feet. . . ." And then he giggles, in a sharp, tickling way, giggles and bites into Jerome's sleeve).

"Die Turnstunde" was written only four days before Rilke essayed another descent into physical and psychological horror in "Frau Blahas Magd" (Frau Blaha's Maid); like "Die Turnstunde," it was first set down in Rilke's diary in the autumn of 1899 at Berlin-Schmargendorf, but it remained in manuscript. An early Rilke biographer, Eliza M. Butler, called it a "truly ghastly tale," while a more sympathetic commentator, Wolfgang Leppmann, has characterized it as "one of the most impressive short stories we have from his hand." Annuschka, a simple-minded country girl leading a wretched life as kitchen help in Prague, gives birth to a child, throttles it with her apron, and puts the corpse away at the bottom of her trunk. Then she buys a puppet theater she has seen

in a toy-store window: "Jetzt hatte Annuschka etwas für das Alleinsein" (Now Annuschka had something for her loneliness). Neighbor children cluster around the theater; Annuschka tells them she also has a very large doll. They want to see it, but when she comes back "mit dem großen Blauen" (with the large blue thing) they become frightened and run away. Annuschka wrecks her theater, and "als die Küche schon ganz dunkel war, ging sie herum und spaltete allen Puppen die Köpfe, auch der großen blauen" (when the kitchen was quite dark, she went around and split the heads of all the puppets, and of the large blue one too). Annuschka has found refuge in an imaginary world; then, at the intrusion of reality, she destroys it. More successfully than in "King Bohusch," Rilke demonstrates what he imagines goes on in a limited or disturbed mind.

Other stories from the diary seem almost compulsively to seek after gruesome effects: the title character in "Der Grabgärtner" (The Grave-Gardener) transforms a cemetery into a garden in full bloom; he has come from the outside world to take the place of the old gravedigger, who has died. During an outbreak of the plague the townspeople, believing that the stranger has caused the epidemic, try to murder him; they succeed in slaying Gita, the mayor's daughter, whom the gravedigger loves. He kills the leader of the mob and goes off into the night, "Man weiß nicht, wohin" (One knows not whither). The story's emphasis is not on the beauty and order the gravedigger has brought to the realm of death, but on mass hysteria and mass horror; Rilke was probably trying to emulate Jacobsen's story "Pesten i Bergamo" (The Plague in Bergamo, 1881; translated as "Death in Bergamo," 1971). Philippe Jullian has called attention to the popularity in late-nineteenth-century art of what may be called necrophiliac scenes, with a superabundance of beautiful dead or dying bodies, as in Jean Delville's *Les Trésors de Sathan* (The Treasures of Satan, 1895) and Aristide Sartorio's *Diana d'Efeso e gli schiavi* (Diana of Ephesus and the Slaves, 1899): "eroticism and death have been blended with great skill." In the Rilke story, revised and published as "Der Totengräber" (The Gravedigger) in *Österreichisches Novellenbuch* (1903), the same public taste is fully met: "Der Wagen ist über und über mit Leichen beladen. Und der rote Pippo hat Genossen gefunden, die ihm helfen. Und sie greifen blind und gierig hinein in den Überfluß und zerren einen heraus, der sich zu wehren scheint. . . . Der Fremde schafft ruhig weiter. Bis ihm der Körper eines jungen Mädchens, nackt und blutig, mit mißhandeltem Haar, vor die Füße fällt" (The wagon is laden with corpses, pile upon pile. And the redhaired Pippo has found comrades who help him. And they reach blindly and greedily into this abundance, and pull out someone who seems to fend them off. . . . The stranger keeps calmly at his work. Until the body of a young girl, naked and bloody, with ill-treated hair, falls at his feet).

In the same autumn of 1899□as Rilke claimed, "in einer stürmischen Herbstnacht" (in a stormy autumn night)□he composed the initial version of the work that, in his lifetime, would make his name familiar to a broad public. It was called "Aus einer Chronik□der Cornet (1664)" (From a Chronicle□the Cornet [1664]); a revision made in Sweden in 1904 became "Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Otto Rilke" (The Lay of the Love and Death of the Cornet Otto Rilke) and was published the same year in August Sauer's Prague journal *Deutsche Arbeit*. The final version, with the hero's name changed to Christoph, was published by Juncker in 1906; in 1912 it was the introductory number in Anton Kippenberg's series of inexpensive but handsome little books, "Die

Inselbücherei," and made its way into thousands of romantically inclined hearts. In twenty-six brief poems in prose (reduced from twenty-nine in the first version and twenty-eight in the second) it gives an account of the last days of a noble officer from Saxony, eighteen years old, during an Austrian campaign against the Turks in western Hungary. Rilke had found a reference to this supposed ancestor in the genealogical materials assembled by his uncle Jaroslav; when he sent the manuscript of "Aus einer Chronik□der Cornet (1664)" to Clara Westhoff, he told her that it was "eine Dichtung . . . die einen Vorfahren mit Glanz umgiebt. Lesen Sie sie an einem Ihrer schönen Abende im weißen Kleid" (a poetic work that surrounds a forebear with splendor. Read it, on one of your beautiful evenings, in your white dress). The boy rides over the dusty plain; makes friends with a French marquis; sits by the campfire; observes the rough life of the bivouac; is presented to the commander, Johann von Sporck (of whom a portrait had hung in the military school at Sankt Pölten); and frees a girl tied nude to a tree□she seems to laugh when her bonds are cut, and the boy is horrified: "Und er sitzt schon zu Ross / und jagt in die Nacht. Blutige Schnüre fest in der Faust" (And he is already mounted on his steed / and gallops into the night. Bloody cords held tight in his grip). The cornet writes to his mother; sees his first dead man, a peasant; and senses that the enemy is near. The company comes to a castle, and the officers are feted□another of Rilke's festivals of beauty. Dressed in white silk (reminiscent of the dress uniform worn by Austrian officers in Viennese operettas), the virgin youth meets the lady of the castle, and shortly, "nackt wie ein Heiliger. Hell und schlank" (naked as a saint. Bright and slim), he spends a night of love with her. "Er fragt nicht: 'Dein Gemahl?' Sie fragt nicht: 'Dein Namen?' . . . Sie werden sich hundert neue Namen geben. . . ." (He does not ask: "Your husband?" She does not ask: "Your name?" . . . They will give one another a hundred new names. . .). The Turks attack, and the troop rides out to meet them; the cornet, whose task is to bear the flag, is not present. But he appears in the nick of time, finds the banner□"auf seinen Armen trägt er die Fahne wie eine weiße, bewußtlose Frau" (he carries the flag in his arms, like a woman, white and unconscious)□and gallops into the midst of the foes; "die sechzehn runden Säbel, die auf ihn zuspringen, Strahl um Strahl, sind ein Fest. / Eine lachende Wasserkunst" (the sixteen curved sabers that leap at him, beam upon beam, are a festival. / A laughing fountain). The next spring, a courier brings the news of his death to his mother. That the tiny book captured a large readership is quite understandable: the impelling rhythms of its prose, the colorful settings, the theatrically simple situations, the amalgamation of eroticism and early heroic death were irresistible. That Rilke's view of war was hopelessly false, and a throwback to the worst extravagances of romanticism, is another matter.

A second book that also found a devoted audience, *Vom lieben Gott und Anderes: An Große für Kinder erzählt* (Concerning Dear God and Other Matters), had also gotten under way in the busy autumn of 1899. These playfully "pious" tales were quickly delivered to the Insel publishing house, administered by Schuster and Loeffler in Berlin, and appeared just in time for the Christmas trade of 1900; a new edition, *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* (translated as *Stories of God*, 1932), came out in 1904, with a dedication to the Swedish feminist and pedagogical writer Ellen Key. The stories have held a prominent place among the "standard" items by the young Rilke, but the Rilke scholar Eudo C. Mason dismissed them as a reproduction of "much of the religious doctrine of *Das Stunden-Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom mönchischen Leben:*

Von der Pilgerschaft: Von der Armuth und vom Tode in prose, in the form of whimsical little tales told to children by a lame cobbler." Professor Mason's statement might be refined to say that the stories reproduce in particular the message of the first part of *Das Stunden-Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom mönchischen Leben: Von der Pilgerschaft: Von der Armuth und vom Tode*, "Das Buch von mönchischen Leben" (The Book of Monkish Life), which Rilke also wrote in the early autumn of 1899. God is in a state of becoming, perceived by artists and repeatedly created in their works, or God is the mystery from which art emanates: "Du Dunkelheit, aus der ich stamme" (You darkness, out of which I come), as *Das Stunden-Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom mönchischen Leben: Von der Pilgerschaft: Von der Armuth und vom Tode* proclaims. Mason's indifference toward *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* is evidenced by his unwonted inaccuracy; the tales are told to several listeners□a neighbor lady, a visiting stranger, a priggish male schoolteacher, District Commissioner Baum, and an artistically inclined young man, as well as the lame cobbler Ewald.

Oddly, the gentle book delights in making fun of the establishment; amid the often sugary trappings and language a sense of rebellion can be detected. In the first tale, "Das Märchen von den Händen Gottes" (The Tale of the Hands of God), the Lord's hands let humankind loose from heaven before the Maker has had a chance to inspect His work; in "Der fremde Mann" (The Strange Man) God's right hand, long since out of favor with God, is cut off by Saint Paul and sent to earth in human form; in "Warum der liebe Gott will, daß es arme Leute gibt" (Why Dear God Wants There to Be Poor People) the shocked schoolteacher is informed that the poor are closest to the truth and so are like artists. (In *Das Stunden-Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom mönchischen Leben: Von der Pilgerschaft: Von der Armuth und vom Tod* Rilke coined the phrase that has garnered him some scorn from socially aware readers: "Denn Armuth ist ein großer Glanz aus Innen" [For poverty is a great shining from within].) The pompous Baum, with his bourgeois view of a "romantic" Venice, is told in "Eine Szene aus dem Ghetto von Venedig" (A Scene from the Venetian Ghetto) about the precarious lot of the Jews in that splendid city, and about the vision of one of them, old Melchisedech, whose daughter has just had a child by a Christian. The narrator wonders what Melchisedech has seen: "'Hat er das Meer gesehen oder Gott, den Ewigen, in seiner Glorie?'" ("Has he beheld the sea or God, the Eternal Being, in His glory?"), to which Baum confidently replies: " 'Das Meer wahrscheinlich . . . es *ist* ja auch ein Eindruck'" ("The sea, probably . . . after all, *that's* an impression too"). As these examples show, the tales suffer from excessive archness; in "Wie der Fingerhut dazu kam, der liebe Gott zu sein" (How the Thimble Came To Be Dear God), the all too clear message is that God is to be found in the least significant of objects□as obvious a point as that made in "Ein Verein aus einem dringenden Bedürfnis heraus" (A Club Created To Meet a Pressing Need), a long-winded formulaic narrative directed against artistic organizations.

The best of the stories are the three devoted to Russian themes, "Wie der Verrat nach Russland kam" (How Treachery Came to Russia), "Wie der alte Timofei singend starb" (How Old Timofei Died Singing), and "Das Lied von der Gerechtigkeit" (The Song of Justice). They are all told to the receptive Ewald and illustrate that Russia is a land that borders on God, a land of true reverence. The opportunity of making a thrust at dry scholarly authority is not allowed to slip by: the tales are based on *byliny* and *skazki*,

epic folk songs and folktales long hidden away by learned men. According to the narrator, the tales have died out among the Russian people, and it seems to be his intention to bring them to life again. The first of the trio tells how a simple peasant demands from the czar not gold but truth and integrity (one more example of the poverty—and poverty of spirit in the biblical sense—that Rilke so admired); the second hopes for a continuation of the ancient line of folksingers and their songs, "darin die Worte wie Ikone sind und gar nicht zu vergleichen mit den gewöhnlichen Worten" (in which the words are like icons and not at all to be compared with ordinary words), even though such a continuation requires the singer to abandon his wife and child; the third is an historical tale from western Russia, in which a blind singer inspires his listeners to throw off the yoke of the Polish lords and the greed of the Jews.

There are also three tales from Italy: the Venetian ghetto story; a tribute to Michelangelo, "Von Einem, der die Steine belauscht" (Concerning Someone Who Eavesdropped on Stones); and another legend on the nature of true poverty, "Der Bettler und das stolze Fräulein" (The Beggar and the Proud Maiden), in which a Florentine noble disguises himself as a beggar and asks the prideful Beatrice to let him kiss the dusty hem of her garment. She is afraid of the strange beggar, but gives him a sack of gold. The experience transforms him: he remains in his beggar's rags, gives away all his possessions, and goes off barefoot into the countryside. Hearing the story, the teacher concludes that it is a tale of how a profligate becomes an eccentric tramp; the narrator rejoins that he has become a saint; and when the children hear the tale, they assert, "zum Ärger des Herrn Lehrer, auch in *ihr* käme der liebe Gott vor" (to the annoyance of the teacher, that dear God appeared in *this* story too). Like "Der Bettler und das stolze Fräulein," "Ein Märchen vom Tode" (A Tale about Death), with its glorification of "der alten schönen Gebärde des breiten Gebetes" (the beautiful old gesture of broad prayer), offers an example of the author's belief in the efficacy of a great or brave gesture that transforms its maker. Having begun with a double prologue set in heaven—the two tales about the hands of God—the collection harks back at its end to Rilke's more realistic stories with "Eine Geschichte, dem Dunkel erzählt" (A Story Told to the Darkness). Klara Söllner defies society's norms by divorcing her husband, a state official, and embarking on an affair with an artist; she rears their love child by herself. The narrator, twitting a narrow- minded public one last time, claims that nothing in the tale is unfit for children's ears; in fact, it reflects the scandalous independence of Rilke's friend, Franziska zu Reventlow.

Klara generously encourages her lover to leave her in pursuit of his art; Rilke himself was settling down to a life of considerably less freedom than he had known before. The young couple took up residence in Westerwede, near Worpswede; Rilke did reviews for a Bremen newspaper and larger periodicals and prepared *Die Letzten* and *Das Buch der Bilder* for publication. On 12 December 1901, their only child, Ruth (named after the heroine of a novel by Lou), was born. Home life could not long appeal to Rilke, and he began to conceive new plans. As a result of his Jacobsen enthusiasm, further readings of the Nordic works that were phenomenally popular in Germany at the time, and his association with Juncker, his interest in the north grew. Spending a month in the early summer of 1902 at Castle Haseldorf in Holstein as a guest of the poetaster Prince Emil von Schönaich-Carolath, he found in the archives sources that had to do with the great

Danish-German Reventlow family: "Diese Wochen hier haben doch ihren Sinn, auch wenn sie nur im Lesen einiger Bücher bestehen" (These weeks here have their meaning after all, even though they consist only of the reading of some books). Simultaneously, he wrote a review of the Swedish reformer Ellen Key's *Barnets arhundrade* (1900; translated into German as *Das Jahrhundert des Kindes*, 1902; translated into English as *The Century of the Child*, 1909), with its recommendation for greater openness in the education of children; the review led to a correspondence with Key and, in time, to an invitation to the north.

But Rilke's immediate plan, the composition of a book about Auguste Rodin, led him to Paris in August 1902. The autumn weeks in the metropolis were difficult for him and formed the basis for several episodes in *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*; leaving Ruth in her parents' care, Clara also traveled to Paris to study with Rodin, but maintained a residence separate from her husband's so that each would have greater freedom. Rilke's production at the time was varied: he had completed his book on the Worpswede painters and the north German landscape in which they worked before he set out for Haseldorf; the Rodin book was written in Paris during November and December 1902 and was published in 1903; the second part of *Das Stunden-Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom mönchischen Leben: Von der Pilgerschaft: Von der Armuth und vom Tode*, "Das Buch von der Pilgerschaft" (The Book of Pilgrimage), had been completed at Westerwede in 1901; and in Paris he wrote verses that would be included in the augmented edition of *Das Buch der Bilder*, as well as "Der Panther" (The Panther), destined to become one of his best-known poems and the earliest of the items included in *Neue Gedichte*. A springtime trip to Viareggio in 1903 gave him the third part of *Das Stunden-Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom mönchischen Leben: Von der Pilgerschaft: Von der Armuth und vom Tode*, the upsetting mixture of eroticism and thoughts about death called "Das Buch von der Armuth und vom Tode" (The Book of Poverty and Death).

After a summer in Germany, the Rilkes set out in September 1903 for Rome; the poet's reaction to the city was one of discomfort. He found himself yearning for the north, and he sent pathetic letters to Key about the failure of the Roman winter and spring to be "real." In February 1904 Rilke made the first sketches for a novel about a young Dane in Paris: "An einem Herbstabende eines dieser letzten Jahre besuchte Malte Laurids Brigge, ziemlich unerwartet, einen von den wenigen Bekannten, die er in Paris besaß" (On an autumn evening of one of these last years Malte Laurids Brigge, rather unexpectedly, visited one of the few acquaintances he had in Paris). Malte tells his listener of a dinner interrupted by a ghostly apparition, an experience he had had when he was twelve or thirteen during a visit to his maternal grandfather's estate, Urnekloster, in the company of his father. The story would become one of the Danish episodes in the novel.

By the most skillful sort of hinting, Rilke arranged a Scandinavian stay from June to December 1904 to collect material for the book. The trip was spent largely with the artist and writer Ernst Norlind and Norlind's fiancée at a chateau, Borgeby, in south Sweden, and then at the home of an industrialist, James Gibson, at Jonsered near Gothenburg. The Gibsons were friends of Key, and a Sunday at the farmhouse of Key's brother, Mac

Key (like the Gibsons, the family was of Scottish origin), in late November 1904 inspired another episode in *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, the visit to the manor house of the Schulins, the center of which has been burned out. There, young Malte learns about fear. For a while Rilke toyed with the idea of preparing monographs on Jacobsen and on the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøj, but dropped both projects. He had learned to read Danish but could not speak it, and Copenhagen, which had initially charmed him as he passed through it, had come to seem ominous to him. He left Denmark on 8 December 1904 and never returned to the north; meeting a young Danish woman, Inga Junghanns, in Munich during the war, he rejoiced to think that the book about Malte would be returned to its "original language" in her translation. But Paris remained his true home, if so peripatetic a soul as Rilke may be said to have had a home.

In many ways 1905 marked a turning point in Rilke's career, just as the liaison with Lou had been the turning point in his personal development. Anton Kippenberg took over the Insel firm; in Kippenberg, Rilke discovered a skillful and usually generous manager of his literary fortunes and personal finances. His employment as Rodin's secretary began in September; it would end abruptly, in a dreadful scene, in May 1906. He made his first public appearances in Germany, reading from his works with a fire that was in contrast to his frail figure and exquisitely gloved hands. And, in part through the agency of the Rhenish banker Karl von der Heydt, he began to make the acquaintance of the noble ladies who would offer him so much solace and so many refuges. The relationship with Clara, whom he had to "keep at bay," in Miss Butler's malicious phrase, grew ever more tenuous, and Rilke developed the talent for swift wooing that would make the Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis (happily married and, save intellectually, not one of his conquests) tell him that Don Juan was an innocent babe in comparison to him. Clara and Ruth briefly joined him on a trip to Belgium, sponsored by von der Heydt, late in the summer of 1906, but he much preferred to travel alone. Perhaps the first of his extramarital romances was with the Venetian Mimi Romanelli, whom he met at the pension of her brother in the autumn of 1907. He was the guest of Frau Alice Faehndrich at the Villa Discopoli on Capri in the winter and spring of 1906-1907 and again in the winter and spring of 1908; there he was surrounded by admiring ladies, among them the young and beautiful Countess Manon zu Solms-Laubach, for whom he wrote the poem "Migliera" (published in volume 2 of his *Sämtliche Werke*, 1956). With Frau Faehndrich, before her death in 1908, he translated Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). Some of the poems from the Capri days found their way into *Neue Gedichte*; the first part, dedicated to the von der Heydts, appeared in 1907, the second, dedicated "À mon grand ami Auguste Rodin," in 1908. The quarrel with the master had been patched up; Rilke remained grateful to Rodin for having taught him the doctrine of work: "Il faut travailler toujours, rien que travailler" (One must work always, nothing but work).

Capri was not the main growing ground for the *Neue Gedichte*; that was Paris, to which Rilke became more attached the more he was able to transform its beauties and horrors into literature. An apartment at the Hôtel Biron in the Rue de Varenne became Rilke's pied-à-terre in August 1908; Rodin liked the Louis-Quatorze mansion so much that he immediately moved his own Parisian studio there. In 1910, on a trip to Leipzig during

which he stayed in the tower room of the Kippenbergs' home, Rilke looked after the final stages of *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. The production of the slender book emptied him, he liked to declare, and no other major work came from his hand during the next twelve years, although the production of this so-called barren period includes some of his best verse.

Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge consists of seventy-one entries divided into two parts, with a break after entry thirty-nine. It has often been conjectured that the model for Malte was the Norwegian poet Sigbjørn Obstfelder (1866- 1900), a devotee of Jacobsen who had lived for some time in Paris; his fragmentary novel *En prests dagbok* (1900; translated into German as *Tagebuch eines Priesters*, 1901; translated into English as *A Priest's Diary*, 1987), and a collection of his other prose, which Rilke reviewed in 1904, had come out in German translation. Much about Obstfelder does not fit, however, the picture of Malte in Rilke's novel: Obstfelder was of modest parentage, an engineer by calling, and had lived and had a nervous breakdown in the American Middle West; the aristocratic Malte□the last of his line□is fetched rather from Rilke's reading of Bang and his own musings about himself and his fancied background. The age of Rilke in February 1904, when the first sketches were made, is that of Malte as he looks back on his life as a man of letters: "Ich bin achtundzwanzig, und es ist so gut wie nichts geschehen. Wiederholen wir: ich habe eine Studie über Carpaccio geschrieben, die schlecht ist, ein Drama, das 'Ehe' heißt und etwas Falsches mit zweideutigen Mitteln beweisen will, und Verse. Ach, aber mit Versen ist so wenig getan, wenn man sie früh schreibt" (I am twenty-eight, and as good as nothing has happened. Let's repeat: I have written a study about Carpaccio, which is poor, a drama, called "Marriage," that tries to prove something false with ambiguous means, and verses. Oh, but how little is accomplished with verses when one writes them early in life). Rilke appears to have imagined that Malte was emotionally destroyed by the Parisian experience; he says in a letter of May 1906, after having heard the "inappropriate" laughter of a French audience at a performance of Ibsen's *Wild Duck*: "Und wieder begriff ich Malte Laurids Brigge und sein Nordischsein und sein Zugrundegehen an Paris. Wie sah und empfand und erlitt er es" (And once more I understood Malte Laurids Brigge and his Nordicness and his destruction by Paris. How he saw and felt and suffered it). Malte is undergoing a severe crisis: entry number twenty describes his visit to the Salpetrière Hospital, apparently for electrotherapy. (That Rilke sometimes feared that he would go insane is indicated by the "last will and testament" he sent to Nanny Wunderly-Volkart on 27 October 1925.)

The substance of the first part of *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, on the one hand, is Malte's awareness of Paris: of "die Existenz des Entsetzlichen in jedem Bestandteil der Luft" (the existence of the horrible in every particle of the air)□the factory-like dying in the city's hospitals, the terrible street noises, the sordidness exposed on every side, coupled with the joy he feels while visiting an antiquarian bookseller's booth by the Seine, reading the poetry of Francis Jammes in the Bibliothéque Nationale, or viewing the tapestry "La dame à la licorne" in the Musée de Cluny. But intermingled with Parisian episodes are memories of his childhood in Denmark□a childhood of dramatic and terrifying scenes: the death of his paternal grandfather at Ulsgaard; ghost stories connected with Urnekloster, the maternal seat; hallucinations, such as a hand emerging from the wall, that he had while recovering

from fever; his tender "Maman," his reserved father, and his maternal aunt Abelone, whom he loves in some never clearly defined way. He wishes he could show her the tapestries in the Parisian museum: "Ich bilde mir ein, du bist da" (I imagine that you are here). The kernel of the Parisian sections is Rilke's own observations, which he often put down in letters; save for quotations from Baudelaire's *Spleen de Paris* and the Book of Job, the Parisian material draws little on literary sources. The Danish components are more mixed, with strong echoes of the description of Danish estate life in the novels of Bang and Jacobsen and of Rilke's own childhood. Upon its appearance *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* was often treated by critics as another novel about the "decadent hero"□the scion of the old family, disheartened, quiveringly sensitive, and suffering from an inability to act, yet admiring those beings□such as a man with Saint Vitus' dance trying to sustain his dignity by a tremendous act of will□who are undefeated. The book is also one of the several works of German fiction from the time that display a strong "Nordic" side.

The second and more difficult part of the novel again employs the main figures from the Danish past: Maman reappears, appreciating the careful work of anonymous lace-makers; young Malte visits the neighboring estate of the Schulins (based on the Key farm); birthdays are celebrated. A mature Malte returns to Copenhagen ("Ulsgaard war nicht mehr in unserm Besitz" [Ulsgaard was no longer in our possession]); witnesses the perforation of his dead father's heart lest he be buried alive; and ponders the death of Denmark's great baroque king, Christian IV, an account of which his father kept in his wallet. Among the Scandinavian figures, Abelone is the most important: taking dictation from her aged father, Count Brahe, for whom the past is part of the present, and introducing young Malte to one of the great "loving women," Bettina Brentano, who outdid Goethe, Malte claims, in the sheer strength of her emotion. Memories of Abelone come to Malte when he hears a Danish woman sing about "besitzlose Liebe" (possessionless love) and its splendors in a Venetian salon: "'weil ich dich niemals anhielt, halt ich dich fest' " ("since I never detained you, I hold you fast"); other salutes to splendid women□the Portuguese nun Heloise, Louise Labé, Sappho, and others□who know that "mit der Vereinigung nichts gemeint sein kann als ein Zuwachs an Einsamkeit" (with union nothing can be meant save an increase in loneliness) prepare for this last quasi-appearance by Abelone. Thus far it is relatively easy to follow Rilke's arguments on love; save in the artistry of the presentation, not much difference exists between the selfless Klara Söllner of the last story of *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* and the singer of the song in Venice. It is harder to grasp, however, what Rilke means when he speaks of Abelone's yearning to take everything that was transitive out of her love, to make it objectless loving, "absolutely, in complete loneliness," in Eudo C. Mason's words.

The horrors of Paris are still with the diarist: Malte□"Ich lerne sehen" (I am learning to see) is the way he describes his most imperative task□ cannot shut his eyes to a girl who stands "mit ihrem dürren, verkümmerten Stück" (with her stunted, withered stump) of an arm or to a blind newspaper vendor. The fear of death is still overriding, not only in the story of the post-mortem operation on Malte's father but even in the comical tale of Nikolaj Kusmitsch, Malte's neighbor in Petersburg, who, realizing how much time he had in his account (he assumed he would live another fifty years or so), resolved to use it

sparingly. The Kusmitsch tale leads into stories about a mother who comes to console her disturbed son and about the rebelliousness of objects, followed by glosses on the dangers of loneliness and an intense and horrifying rehearsal of the temptations of Saint Anthony.

Other narratives are baffling, especially the stories recalled from the little green book Malte owned as a boy about the end of the false Dmitri, Grischa Otrepjow; the death of Charles the Bold of Burgundy; the mad Charles VI of France; John XXII, the Avignon pope; and the terrible fourteenth century, "Die Zeit, in der der Kuss zweier, die sich versöhnten, nur das Zeichen für die Mörder war, die herumstanden" (The time in which the kiss of reconciliation between two men was merely the signal for the murderers standing nearby). This awful reflection comes to Malte after he has remembered a trauma of his childhood, a time of similar insecurity, in which he thought himself pursued by another of those large and threatening male figures, like Král and Holzer of the early stories. Perhaps the historical exempla are meant to illustrate Rilke's thoughts on the human will, a will that is variously jeopardized or fails: just before the pistol shot that ends Grischa Otrepjow's life, the pretender experiences "noch einmal Wille und Macht . . . alles zu sein" (once more the will and power . . . to be everything). The will also sustains Eleonora Duse, to whom tribute is paid after a sideswipe at contemporary theater, but here the artist's will has made her overrun□magnificently and frighteningly□the limits of the art in which she must perform. Much of the second part of *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* could be presented as a statement, as oblique as the first part's is direct, on the strange heroism of the exceptional human who exceeds, or attempts to exceed, his own limitations, forever standing alone. The original ending of the novel, criticizing Tolstoy, who had abandoned his art and was beset by fears of death ("Es war kein Zimmer in diesem Haus, in dem er sich nicht gefürchtet hatte, zu sterben" [There was no room in this house in which he had not feared he would die]), was supplanted by the story of the Prodigal Son, retold as "die Legende dessen . . . der nicht geliebt werden wollte" (the legend of him . . . who did not wish to be loved)□a representation, as Joseph-François Angelloz thought, of Rilke's long search for the freedom that would enable him to apply his artistic will to the fullest. The final lines are cryptic: "Er war jetzt furchtbar schwer zu lieben, und er fühlte, daß nur Einer dazu imstande sei. Der aber wollte noch nicht" (He was now terribly difficult to love, and he felt that there was only One who was capable of it. He, however, did not yet want to). Mason suggests that this is a "hyperbolic way" of implying that there is no plane, "human or superhuman," on which the problem of love can be solved for one who, like the Prodigal Son, is "governed by a daemonic dread of his sacrosanct, isolated selfhood being encroached upon through the love of any other human being."

Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge is at once a profoundly satisfying and unsatisfying book. It presents in unforgettable language the tribulations of a sensitive being in an overwhelmingly beautiful and ugly world□the omnipresence of fear; the search for small joys ("Was so ein kleiner Mond alles vermag" [How much such a little moon can do]); the residual terrors of childhood, never to be overcome; the problems of loving; the profits and torments of being alone. Formally, the novel seems less daunting than it did to readers of the past; Rilke advertises his intention of writing a nonlinear novel: "Daß man erzählte, wirklich erzählte, das muß vor meiner Zeit gewesen sein"

(That people told stories, really told stories, that must have been before my time). Just the same, in many episodes—the banquet at Urnekloster, the death of the chamberlain Brigge, the visit to the Schulins, the death of Charles of Burgundy—Rilke proved himself a master of the short story, in which he had served such a long apprenticeship. As Wolfgang Leppmann points out, the reader can become "frustrated": he is asked to know the obscure historical facts Rilke had stored away in the corners of his mind or culled directly from other texts; he may find some of the doctrines advanced (for example, intransitive love) hard to grasp, let alone embrace. What may be overlooked, in grappling with *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, is that it is, after all, a feigned diary and also incomplete: Rilke told Lou Andreas-Salomé that he had ended it out of exhaustion. Furthermore, it is a personal document: Rilke made fun of Ellen Key for having identified Malte with him, yet she was by no means inaccurate in her naiveté. In Paris for his last visit, he would write to Nanny Wunderly- Volkart: "Je m'effraie comme, autrefois, Malte s'est effrayé. . . ." (I am terrified, as, formerly, Malte was terrified . . .). In his letters, he could never let Malte go.

The post-*Malte* time was marked by flurries of frantic travel: to North Africa in the autumn of 1910; to Egypt in the spring of the next year with the mysterious Jenny Oltersdorf, about whom Rilke remained forever close-mouthed; to Castle Duino, near Trieste, a holding of the Thurn und Taxis clan, in 1911-1912 (here the "angel" of the *Duineser Elegien* is supposed to have spoken to him, inspiring the work that would not be complete until 1922); to Venice again, to spend much of the remainder of 1912-1913; to Spain in the winter of 1912-1913; and, in the summer of 1913, to Göttingen for a visit with Lou Andreas- Salomé. He spent October 1913 to late February 1914 in Paris and was in Munich when World War I broke out in August 1914. (The singer of the deeds of the cornet greeted the conflict with enthusiastic verse he soon regretted.) If the itinerary of these years is long, so is the list of feminine friends: the motherly and excitable Marie von Thurn und Taxis; the haughty Helene von Nostitz; the vivacious Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin, whom Rilke dissuaded from marrying the satirist Karl Kraus. On the passionate side, there was the simple Parisienne Marthe Hennebert, for a time Rilke's "ward"; and the pianist Magda von Hattingberg, or "Benvenuta," for both of whom he pondered a divorce from Clara. He could not do without the blue-blooded friends or the ones who became objects of his desire—such as the "douce perturbatrice," the phrase he bestowed on Marthe in one of the French poems he wrote more and more frequently.

The war years kept him far away from his Parisian books and papers, some of which were irretrievably lost, others saved through the good offices of his friend André Gide, whose *Le Retour de l'enfant prodigue* he had translated into German in 1913-1914. His principal residence was Munich, and his principal companion for a while was the painter Lulu Albert-Lasard. A rising tide of mainly erotic poetry in 1915 was interrupted by a draft call to the Austrian army at Christmas. He spent a wretched few weeks in basic training and was saved by powerful friends, including Princess Marie, who effected his transfer to the dull safety of the War Archive and comfortable quarters in Hietzing's Park-Hotel. Rilke continued to complain about his enforced residence in detestable Vienna and was released from service in June. The rest of the war went by in a kind of convalescence— mostly in Munich, but the summer of 1917 included a stay on an estate in Westphalia, and the autumn of the same year a stay in Berlin. There he saw both Walther Rathenau

and Marianne Mitford (née Friedländer-Fuld), whose exceptionally wealthy family owned an estate in the vicinity of the capital: she received one of the first copies of his 1918 translation of the sonnets of the Lyonnaise poetess of the Renaissance, Louise Labé, whom he had ranked among the great lovers in *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. Back in Munich, he lived first at the Hotel Continental and then in an apartment in the artists' quarter of Schwabing; observing the "Munich revolution," vaguely sympathizing with Kurt Eisner's idealistic socialism, and giving shelter for a night to the fugitive author Ernst Toller, Rilke was briefly suspected of leftist sympathies by the victorious "White" forces that took over the city on 1 May 1919. At the same time, he enjoyed the innocent attentions of Elya Maria Nevar, a young actress, and the less innocent ones of the would-be femme fatale Claire Studer ("Liliane"), shortly to become the mistress and then the wife of the expressionist poet and editor Iwan Goll.

Casting about for a refuge from postwar Germany's turbulence, Rilke was invited to undertake a reading tour in Switzerland. Once he had made fun of Switzerland and its scenic "Übertreibungen" (exaggerations), its "anspruchsvolle" (pretentious) lakes and mountains; now he was glad to cross the border. Some of his Swiss sanctuaries were much less satisfactory than he had hoped: at Schönenberg, near Basel, a summer home of the Burckhardt family, where he lived from March until May 1920, he liked neither the house's grounds nor its feeble stoves; at Castle Berg am Irchel, near Zurich, placed at his disposal by a Colonel Ziegler for the winter of 1920-1921, he was bothered by children at play and the noise of a sawmill□but at Berg there also appeared to him, he said, the phantom who dictated the double cycle of poems *Aus dem Nachlaß des Grafen C. W.* (1950; translated as *From the Remains of Count C. W.*, 1952). He quickly found new friends; the most important was "Nike," Nanny Wunderly-Volkart, the witty and self-controlled wife of the industrialist Hans Wunderly. Through her Rilke discovered and had rented for him a little tower at Muzot, near Sierre, in the canton of Valais; there□as literary histories never tire of repeating□he finished the *Duineser Elegien* and received the "additional gift" of *Die Sonette an Orpheus: Geschrieben als ein Grab-Mal für Wera Ouckama Knoop* in February 1922. (It is plain, though, that he knew the storm of inspiration was coming: he had some difficulty in persuading the great love of the first Swiss years, "Merline," or Baladine Klossowska, that he needed to be alone, cared for only by his competent housekeeper, Frida Baumgartner.)

Rilke announced the completion of his task with justifiable pride; the afterglow of accomplishment permeates his letters during the remainder of 1922. A sense of aging also came over him, however: his daughter married, and in 1923 he became a grandfather. (The birth of Ruth herself, he had told a friend years before, had given him a similar sense of "l'immense tristesse de ma propre futilité" [the immense sadness of my own futility].) His health declined: he spent time at a half-resort, half-hospital at Schöneck on the Lake of Lucerne, and then repeatedly at the sanatorium of Valmont above the Lake of Geneva. Rilke had always had a weakness for the restful weeks at a sanatorium or spa□for the sake of his nerves, he liked to say□ and they brought useful and interesting contacts: in 1905 at the sanatorium "Weisser Hirsch" near Dresden he had met Countess Luise Schwerin, who had put him in touch with the von der Heydt and Faehndrich circles. Nevertheless, he had become hesitant about the efficacy of physicians in dealing with his ills, real or fancied, and regarded sleep as the great cure-

all. The year 1924 opened and closed with stays at Valmont. From January to August 1925 he had his final sojourn in Paris□he was lionized during his stay there, but perhaps the most sincere of his many admirers was the Alsatian Maurice Betz, who was at work on a translation of *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. By December he was back at Valmont, staying until May 1926. His last works were his translations of Paul Valéry's poetry and prose and three small volumes of his own French verse. Carl J. Burckhardt, a Swiss diplomat who possessed a keen eye for Rilke's weaknesses, recalled that Rilke did not understand how reserved and even condescending Valéry was toward the "German" poet who late in his career tried his hand at French. Rilke appears to have sought Valéry's company, chatting with him a last time in September 1926 at Anthy on the French side of Lake Geneva. A special issue of *Les Cahiers du Mois*, "Reconnaissance à Rilke," edited by the faithful Betz, had appeared at Paris in the summer of 1926□its opening a restrained salute from Valéry's own hand.

Also in September 1926 the critic Edmond Jaloux introduced Rilke to Nimet Eloui Bey, an Egyptian beauty of Circassian background. When Rilke was still viewed as the devoted and sensitive admirer of women but not an erotic adventurer, Jaloux's account of this "last friendship" seemed the perfect finale for the poet's romantic life; gathering white roses for her, Rilke pricked his hand, and the injury became infected, a harbinger of the final onslaught of his illness. It is now known that the Egyptian was but one of the women and girls who surrounded and attracted him almost to the end: the eighteen-year-old Austrian Erika Mitterer, who carried on a correspondence in poems with him from 1924 to 1926; the Russian poetess Marina Tsvetayeva, who wanted to visit and consume him; the pretty Lalli Horstmann, a friend of Marianne Mitford; the Dutch singer Beppy Veder; and the actress Elisabeth Bergner were among the many. What may be more significant about the "last friendship" with Nimet Eloui Bey, though, is that she wanted to meet the author of *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, which she had just read in Betz's translation□the book of his that lay closest to his own heart.

Source: George C. Schoolfield, "Rainer Maria Rilke," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 81, *Austrian Fiction Writers, 1875-1913*, edited by James Hardin and Donald G. Daviau, Gale Research, 1989, pp. 244-71.

Adaptations

Rilke: Selected Poems (1998) is an audiocassette published by Audio Literature. It features Stephen Mitchell reading Rilke's poems.

ParaTheatrical ReSearch produced *Requiem for a Friend* (1991), a VideoPoem/Docudrama by Antero Alli, based on the Stephen Mitchell translation of a Rilke poem.

Topics for Further Study

Rilke is a poet of memory and often seems obsessed with his personal past, especially his childhood. Describe at least two powerfully emotional incidents from your childhood in which one or both of your parents played a part. Use as much detail as possible. Then, ask your parents to describe the incidents. How does your memory of events differ from theirs? Write a short essay accounting for the difference.

In groups, brainstorm a list of adjectives and images you believe represent your experience as a child and then compose a poem using as many of these words as possible. Take turns reading the poem aloud to the class.

In groups, translate Rilke's poem literally, word for word, and then compare your translation with Bly's translation. Discuss the choices Bly made and the reasons why he might have made them. What does this exercise tell you about the practice of translating poetry?

As a class, use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast childhood and adulthood. Note the differences that most surprise you and discuss them as a class.

Rilke wrote "Childhood" after spending time at the artist colony at Worpswede, and some critics claim he uses words the way painters use paint. In groups, compose a visual representation of Rilke's poem using paint, crayons, markers, images from magazines, and any other appropriate materials. Present your compositions to the class, explaining the choices you made. Post the work in the classroom, gallery style.

Rilke was very self-conscious, both in his poetry and in his interactions with others. Practice seeing as Rilke did by sitting still for a half hour and concentrating on one object. In writing, describe both that object and the emotions you experienced looking at it. Read the description to your class and have classmates ask you questions about your description, with the goal of helping them to experience it more powerfully.

Compare and Contrast

1900-1910: In 1900, Freud publishes *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which attempts to explain phenomena such as sexuality and abnormal desires.

Today: Freud remains popular, though many of his theories have been discredited.

1900-1910: The December 1900 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* predicts that exercise will become compulsory in schools and that by the year 2000 those who cannot walk ten miles a day will be considered weaklings.

Today: Obesity is a major health problem in both Western Europe and the Untied States, as people eat more and exercise less.

1900-1910: German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who proclaimed "God is dead" and whose ideas influenced Hitler, dies.

Today: Nietzsche's ideas continue to influence philosophers and social theorists throughout the world.

What Do I Read Next?

Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929) remains one of his most popular works. In it, Rilke dispenses advice on art, love, life, and how to be a poet in ten intensely emotional letters to a former student of one of his own teachers.

Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke (1995), translated by Stephen Mitchell and released by Modern Library, provides a good introduction to Rilke's work.

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge (1910) is Rilke's only novel. Malte Laurids Brigge is a Danish nobleman and poet living in Paris, who is obsessed with death, his family, and the city.

Rilke has been a major influence on contemporary poets, such as Mark Strand. Strand's *Selected Poems* was released in 1990.

Further Study

Baron, Frank, Ernst S. Dick, and Warren R. Mauer, eds., *Rilke: The Alchemy of Alienation*, Regents Press of Kansas, 1980.

This anthology contains English-language essays by Rilke scholars such as Stephen Spender, Lev Kopelev, Walter H. Sokel, Andras Sandor, and Erich Simenauer. It is a useful resource for students already familiar with Rilke's work.

Freedman, Ralph, *Life of a Poet: A Biography of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1995.

Freedman's biography is a detailed accounting of Rilke's life with special attention paid to his many love affairs.

Gass, William, *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation*, Knopf, 1999.

Postmodernist Gass provides an idiosyncratic reading of *The Duino Elegies* while exploring some of the thornier issues of translation.

Sword, Helen, *Engendering Inspiration: Visionary Strategies in Rilke, Lawrence, and H. D.*, University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Sword explores the early twentieth-century poetic visions of Rilke, D. H. Lawrence, and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle).

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

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When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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