Letters to a Young Poet Study Guide

Letters to a Young Poet by Rainer Maria Rilke

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Letters to a Young Poet Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Plot Summary....3

Section 1....5

Section 2....7

Section 3....9

Section 4....11

Section 5....13

Section 6....15

Section 7....17

Characters....19

Objects/Places....20

Themes....23

Style....25

Quotes....28

Topics for Discussion....30

Plot Summary

This book consists of ten letters, written by famed poet Rainer Maria Rilke, to a Young Poet who initially sought him out for writing advice, but ended up learning a great deal about life. The letters encourage the Young Poet to develop an understanding of, and connection, to his inner creative soul. In doing so, Rilke explores themes relating to the necessity of solitude, the relationships between creativity, nature and sexuality, and the importance of living a full life. Over the years the book (originally published by the Young Poet to whom the *Letters* were originally written) has come to be seen as a kind of guide to life, not just for artists and other creative individuals but for anyone determined to get in touch with her own humanity.

The first of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* is evidently a response to a letter written to Rilke by the Young Poet. Rilke thanks the Young Poet politely for sending him his work for criticism, commenting briefly but gently that the work is, for the most part, immature and underdeveloped. He then begins a series of discussions, continued throughout the *Letters,* of how both the Young Poet and his work can become more mature, more richly developed, and ultimately more connected to the Young Poet's creative soul.

This last point is Rilke's main concern, explored throughout the letters via several key themes. The first theme is Rilke's insistence that solitude, and contemplation within the context of that solitude, is essential if the Young Poet (and, by extension and implication, any artist) is to create work of both universal truth and lasting value. A second of Rilke's important themes, again developed throughout several of the letters, is that creativity is inextricably linked to nature, which he in fact suggests is the ultimate manifestation of creativity—all nature, he suggests, is an act of creation. Rilke's third key theme, perhaps a surprising one, is that sexual expression and experience of sexual feeling is both a manifestation of the creative spirit and an expression of humanity's nature. Rilke's fourth key theme is the importance of love and connection between individuals, an experience absolutely essential for the Young Poet (and again, by extension all artists) if he is to come to both an understanding of himself and nature. Throughout the book, Rilke contends that once an experience or understanding of these aspects of human life have been absorbed, only then is true, transcendent art possible.

Rilke's final thematic point is that a deepening understanding of life and its meanings is only possible if it is truly lived. He repeatedly suggests that the Young Poet must both engage fully in everything he experiences (his non-writing career, his relationships, his sexual desires, his writing) as well as contemplate them in solitude. The letters demonstrate this theme in more ways than simply their content. For example, the fact that they are written from several different locations in Europe—France, Italy, Germany, Sweden—offers the very clear sense that Rilke, while restless and frequently ill, is out in the world seeing new places, living new experiences, and integrating new perceptions and understandings of humanity into his creative spirit and life. There is also the sense Rilke is writing from a very personal, intimate perspective. Letter 8 in particular carries

with it the very powerful implication that Rilke is writing about both pain and comfort from a place of experience, contemplation and understanding.

The *Letters* contain no specific descriptions of the Young Poet, very few descriptions of his work, no examples of his work, and above all none of his letters to Rilke. Everything the reader comes to understand about the Young Poet must be gleaned from hints in Rilke's writing. Nevertheless, the book gives the impression the Young Poet undergoes a journey of transformation over the course of his correspondence with Rilke. It seems that in his first letter, the Young Poet is insecure and lacks connection with his own genuine, unique creative impulse. Over the course of the letters he struggles to connect with that impulse, trying the techniques Rilke suggests. By the conclusion of the book, Rilke seems to indicate the Young Poet has come to a place of completion and accomplishment, has connected with his creative voice and written a poem Rilke says is undeniably his own. The implication, as the letters draw to a close, is that while this stage of the Young Poet's development is ending, his true creative journey is just beginning.

Section 1

Section 1 Summary and Analysis

This book consists of ten letters, written by famed poet Rainer Maria Rilke, to a Young Poet who initially sought him out for writing advice, but ended up learning a great deal about life. The letters encourage the Young Poet to develop an understanding of, and connection, to his inner creative soul. In doing so, Rilke explores themes relating to the necessity of solitude, the relationships between creativity, nature and sexuality, and the importance of living a full life. Over the years the book (originally published by the Young Poet to whom the *Letters* were originally written) has come to be seen as a kind of guide to life, not just for artists and other creative individuals but for anyone determined to get in touch with her own humanity.

Letter 1 - "Paris, February 17, 1903" This letter, written in response to a letter of inquiry from The Young Poet, begins with a reference to The Young Poet's apparent request for Rilke to critique his poems. Rilke responds with a criticism of criticism (see "Quotes," p. 3), and a comment on the nature of the sort of art the Young Poet is striving to create (see "Quotes," p. 4). Rilke then offers brief commentary, simultaneously positive and critical, on the poems sent to him by the Young Poet, saying essentially while they hint at something deeper, they are quite evidently the work of an inexperienced writer. Rilke offers the suggestion that the Young Poet look deep within himself for two things—the answer to the question of whether he is truly driven to be an artist, and the source of personal, human truth that will make him an artist. He writes at length of how essential it is the Young Poet discover the answers to both questions, and suggests that if the answer to the first is that there is no real drive, the Young Poet must leave off pursuing art and feel no shame—there is, Rilke writes, still truth and value in living a non-artistic life. Rilke then writes in detail about the inner emotional and spiritual resources available to the Young Poet, and how essential it is for him to mine those resources deeply, earnestly and honestly if he is to be a true artist. Rilke concludes with a request that the Young Poet remember him to Professor Horacek, a teacher at the Young Poet's school with whom Rilke studied at one point. He then says he is returning the Young Poet's poems, and offers thanks for the Young Poet's trust, which Rilke says he has tried to respond to as honestly as he can, trying to "make [him]self a little worthier than [he], as a stranger, really [is]."

The first element of analysis of this letter, and indeed of all the letters, must be consideration of what was written by the Young Poet that triggered Rilke to write what he did. This must take place on two levels—the facts of what was written, and the feelings behind them. Fact-wise, the original letter seems to have contained a fairly straightforward request for commentary and criticism on some poems. In the realm of feelings, the Young Poet's letter seems to have contained a sense of uncertainty, of yearning for clarity of purpose, otherwise it is doubtful Rilke would have responded the way he did..

In this and all the letters, Rilke offers guidance not only to the Young Poet and artists in general, but to people questioning their calling and identity in whatever profession. Rilke's urging that the Young Poet be certain of his desires, of his vocation and profession, could apply equally to anyone. There are jobs people do for a living, and there are jobs that are part of a life—Rilke here is speaking to the latter, people like the Young Poet struggling to determine their life's work, as opposed to the work of their lives.

On an even deeper level, the *Letters* can be seen as offering guidance on life in general, not just the creative life. In particular, Rilke's discussions of love (Section 5, Letter 7), sexuality (Section 2, Letter 3 and Section 3, Letter 4), and the relationships between male and female (Section 2, Letter 3 and Section 5, Letter 7) can all be seen as offering valuable perspectives on the ways day to day existence can be contemplated, if not redefined.

Another key component of this letter is the first appearance of parallels between the two men and their experiences. Specifically, their link via Professor Horacek (the Introduction states that Horacek taught both men, albeit in two different military schools) suggests and foreshadows other, more spiritual links between them that become apparent in later letters. These links include their shared artistic calling (as poets), their shared difficulties in living that calling (concerns about sexuality, love and relationships in particular), and eventually their common ability to transcend those difficulties and create poetry that is a true expression of both themselves and the universal experience of being human.

Section 2

Section 2 Summary and Analysis

Letter 2 - "Viareggio, near Pisa (Italy), April 5, 1903" This first short letter from Viareggio begins with an apology from Rilke for not having written back to The Young Poet sooner. Rilke explains he has been ill and has traveled to Italy, where he previously recovered from another illness, in order to hasten his recuperation. He then offers two pieces of advice. The first is to avoid over-use of irony in writing, suggesting it can become too easily and too frequently employed. Once the Young Poet digs deeply into himself for an understanding of the essence of things, irony will, for the most part, disappear. Rilke then suggests the Young Poet keep two works of literature by his side, readily available for reference. The first is the Bible, and the second is the work of writer Jens Peter Jacobsen, which Rilke suggests is invaluable. He writes that Jacobsen and the sculptor Rodin are, among all the artists living at the time, "without peer" in their ability to give "the greatest experience of the essence of creativity, its depths and eternity."

Letter 3 - "Viareggio, near Pisa (Italy), April 23, 1903" This letter begins with Rilke complimenting the Young Poet on his insightful comments on the works of Jacobsen, which the Young Poet has evidently begun to read. After offering suggestions on which of Jacbobsen's books he might read next, Rilke urges the Young Poet to not read criticism of Jacobsen and to trust his own feelings and intuition (see "Quotes," p. 23). He then writes at poetic length of how the processes of both creation and understanding take time and patience, as well as understanding of the sub-conscious nature of both. "To let each impression and each embryo of a feeling come to completion," he writes, "entirely in itself, in the dark, in the unsayable, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one's own understanding, and with deep humility and patience to wait for the hour when a new clarity is born ... this alone is what it means to live as an artist: in understanding as in creating."

The second half of this letter is taken up with Rilke's examination of the writing of Richard Dehmel, whom the Young Poet has evidently described as "'living and writing in heat.'" Rilke uses this comment as a springboard for an extensive commentary on the relationship between sexuality and creativity (see "Quotes," p. 26), writing that the artist's "poetic power is great and as strong as a primal instinct; it has its own relentless rhythms in itself and explodes from him like a volcano." He adds that Dehmel's work, like that of so many (male) artists, is written from the perspective of male sexuality. "...there is something narrow in [t]his sexual feeling," Rilke writes, "something that seems wild, malicious, time-bound, uneternal, which diminishes his art and makes it ambiguous and doubtful." He describes this aspect of Dehmel's work, and world, as being far from a realistic, deeper understanding of sexual relations.

The letter concludes with a reference to the Young Poet's request for Rilke to send him some books. Rilke protests he is too poor to afford his books, once they have been

published, and writes he is enclosing a list of books and publishers so the Young Poet can shop for them on his own.

In analyzing Letter 2, one notes there are few, if any references to the content of the letter from the Young Poet to which Rilke is responding. His comments about irony might be a response to a particularly ironic comment in the letter, or to the presence of irony in another piece of writing sent to him. Letter 3, however, contains clear indications of what Rilke is responding to—the Young Poet's comments on the writing of Jacobsen and Dehmel. The content of Rilke's letters suggests the Young Poet is taking his advice and commentary quite seriously. This is perhaps a reason why Rilke continues to offer additional insights—his audience/pupil is clearly interested in what he is saying, and taking it to heart. What writer, when faced with an eager reader, will not have more to say?

What can be gleaned about the Young Poet's emotional and intellectual state in his letters? It seems the Young Poet is taking Rilke's suggestions to heart, perhaps even trying to impress him with his perspective and commentary. This may be reading too much into Rilke's letter, but at this stage in the correspondence, is the Young Poet doing what he is doing in the name of self-improvement, or in an attempt to gain respect from the senior artist he reveres?

There is the sense the Young Poet is being transformed as the result of this conversation by correspondence. Like many a character in many a novel before him, the Young Poet is being challenged to discover himself, to face down obstacles that keep him from making that discovery, and to accept and trust the wisdom of those who would help him along the way. It is, in some ways, the mythic hero's journey—an external series of confrontations (with Rilke) lead to both an external triumph (the completion of a quality poem) and internal growth (a better connection with soul and self, inspired by Rilke). This identification with the archetypal hero's journey (the structural, emotional, thematic and spiritual core of stories ancient through modern) is perhaps one of the reasons for the popularity of *Letters to a Young Poet*.

Rilke's commentary in Letter 3 develops two of his central themes—the necessity for contemplation, and the relationship between creativity and sexuality. This latter is explored with particularly vivid imagery—it is difficult to avoid comparisons between the explosion of the volcano and the explosion of seminal fluid during male orgasm. In response to this imagery, it is important to contrast Rilke's views of male sexuality with his views on female sexuality expressed here, and the relationship between the sexual expression of the two genders, in Section 5, Letter 7. In terms of Rilke's comments on contemplation, what he leaves unsaid here is stated at other points throughout the letters— true contemplation, and therefore true understanding, can only be realized as the result of solitude, the importance of which is another of the book's recurring themes.

The reference at the end of Letter 3 to Rilke's inability to send the Young Poet copies of his published works foreshadows a reference in Letter 9 to Rilke sending the Young Poet a copy of a poem published in a magazine—a magazine being more affordable for Rilke than an actual book.

Section 3

Section 3 Summary and Analysis

Letter 4 - "Worpswede, near Bremen (Germany), July 16, 1903" This letter begins with another reference to Rilke having been ill, and having traveled to another climate in order to further his healing process. He also describes the weather, which is cold and cloudy, and refers to the Young Poet's letter as bringing light into his day. He urges the Young Poet, who has in Rilke's words expressed a "beautiful anxiety" about life, to embrace solitude and loneliness, suggesting that both offer opportunities for him to go deeply into himself and gain greater insight and understanding of Nature (see "Quotes," p. 33). He also urges the Young Poet to embrace his questions and celebrate them, rather than focus on the absence of answers, since life and art are both composed of both questions and answers, neither of which is more or less valuable than the other.

Rilke then writes at length about the relationship between sexuality and creativity, suggesting that while sex is often difficult, it is generally human attitudes towards sex that make it so. He suggests sexual expression is an essential, sophisticated way of connecting with Nature, self, and humanity, suggesting that sexual union and creativity are both powerful manifestations of present experience and hope for the future. "Don't be confused by surfaces," he writes, "in the depths everything becomes law." He refers to the parallels between a girl growing to be a woman and a boy growing to be a man, wondering whether "the sexes are more akin than people think" (see "Quotes," p. 41-A). Rilke then writes, with similar poetic intensity, about the value of solitude, suggesting it is the perfect medium for an artist to work in, that the artist should in fact seek it out (see "Quotes," p. 41-B), and that the key to thriving in solitude is understanding that even in aloneness there is still love (see "Quotes," p. 43). This letter concludes with a reference to the Young Poet moving into a profession (the military) in which both independence and solitude are readily available. He urges the Young Poet to be aware of, and open to, the possibility of individual interpretation of the experience, as well as the restrictions on that interpretation imposed by the profession. He suggests "solitude will be a support and a home for [the Young Poet], even in the midst of very unfamiliar circumstances." ???????In this letter Rilke is evidently responding to concerns about loneliness and solitude expressed by the Young Poet in his most recent letter. There are several key points to note here. The first is how Rilke explores several of his letters' recurring themes—the relationship between sexuality and creativity, the simultaneous parallels and differences between male and female, and the importance of solitude. In exploring these themes, this letter introduces an apparently paradoxical tension— Rilke is urging the Young Poet to embrace sexuality, which is most fulfillingly experienced between two individuals, and to embrace solitude, which, by definition, is experienced by only one person. A second key point is that Rilke never states, here or at any point in these letters, that one is more important than the other—he indicates strongly, however, that fully engaged experiences of both are essential. Union and separation, two persons and one person, two sides but one coin—Rilke is not contradicting himself, but

advocating a balance, a balance the Introduction suggests he was constantly struggling to achieve in his own life.

A third key point, and perhaps the principal point, is that Rilke writes from the clear perspective that life should be lived. He clearly suggests here, and develops the point throughout the book, that pleasure and suffering are equally valuable. It is in fact essential to embrace both if the Young Poet and, by extension, all artists and human beings, are to connect with, and draw upon the power of, their eternal and internal self.

In the Introduction to this particular edition of the *Letters*, biographical information indicates that over the course of his correspondence with Rilke, the Young Poet concludes his time at military school and actually enters into service in the Armed Forces. This is "the profession" referred to here and which, in later letters (particularly Section 7, Letter 10) is portrayed as a kind of spiritual, creative haven. For consideration of Rilke's perspectives on "the profession," see "Questions."

Section 4

Section 4 Summary and Analysis

Letter 5 - "Rome, October 29, 1903" This brief letter consists almost entirely of Rilke's reactions to being in Rome, which he describes as noisy, crowded, and filled with beauty, although every place, he writes, has an abundance of beauty in it. Rome, he maintains, is not exceptional even though artists, historians and everyday people have asserted for centuries that it is. The statues, the architecture, the paintings, even the history, he says, are "nothing more than accidental remains from another time and from a life that is not and should not be ours." He adds, however, that some of the "Things" that make up Rome—the statues, the architecture—represent "something eternal endures that one can love", suggesting that there is in the middle of it all something "solitary" that one can connect with. He writes of looking forward to moving into a quiet apartment where he can connect with that something solitary and indulge in many "happy, work filled hours". He then writes that a promised book of writings, some of which are the Young Poet's, has not arrived, and expresses the hope that it is merely lost in the post and will eventually catch up with him. He promises to read it and "experience [it] as well and as sincerely as [he] can" as soon as it arrives.

Letter 6 - "Rome, December 23, 1903" This letter is essentially a further commentary on the necessity and value of solitude. It begins with a reference to how the Young Poet seems to feel the pain of solitude more deeply around Christmas, and is followed by Rilke's assertion that the Young Poet must experience solitude in the same way as a child does (see "Quotes," p. 54-55). Rilke then writes at length of how the Young Poet's profession (the military) is not unique. In Rilke's view, all the professions serve, on varying levels and in varying degrees, to alienate an individual from his soul and solitude. He contends, however, that the Young Poet's connection to his solitude will enable him to survive the rigors of his profession, and that the connection can and should be strengthened by the Young Poet's contemplation of the world of Things—of living ideas, growing children, and animals.

Rilke then suggests that if the Young Poet finds the solitude of recalling his childhood frightening "because [he] can no longer believe in God, who appears in it everywhere," he should ask himself whether he lost God, or whether he ever knew God in the first place. Rilke develops the argument that an understanding of God, "the ultimate fruit of a tree whose leaves we are," the ultimate perfection, can only come after a full and broad experience of imperfection has been lived, accepted, and absorbed. "Must not [God]," Rilke writes, "be the last one, so that he can include everything in himself ... what meaning would we have if he whom we are longing for has already existed?" He suggests that humanity's understanding of God is like honey—just as bees gather pollen and other materials to manufacture the sweetness of honey, so human beings gather their experiences and suffering and manifest the sweetness, the truth of God. Rilke concludes this letter with the suggestion that perhaps the Young Poet's pain at his solitude is the beginnings of the sweetness, the understanding of God, to come.

These two letters can be paired first by their both having been written in Rome, a city rich in history and what has been described as ancient truths. They are also share Rilke's contemplation of the eternal—the apparent universality and timeless truths about humanity found in the art of Rome and in traditional teachings about God. Thirdly, they share Rilke's apparent contention that both sources of these "truths" are, in fact, little more than shallow understanding. This latter point is expressed quite directly in Letter 5, with its intriguing take on traditional, pervasive attitudes towards Roman history and culture. These attitudes are essentially that the past, as embodied in the remnants of Ancient Rome, is more glorious and more inspiring than the present. This is entirely antithetical to Rilke's consistently argued point that the present, the truly lived and deeply contemplated present, is the only true source of creative impulse. The point is also made in Letter 6, albeit less directly. Rilke's perspective on the nature of God would, at the time at which they were written (the early 1900's), have in all likelihood been considered at best strange, at worst heretical. Traditional, patriarchal forms of Christianity were by far the dominant religious, spiritual perspective of the time, and the views Rilke expresses here would, in all likelihood, have been considered odd. In both instances, however, Rilke is essentially urging the Young Poet to make up his own mind based on his own experience and on what his creative soul tells him.

In Letter 5, other than the specific reference to the Young Poet's book of writings, there are no references to the literal content of letters sent by the Young Poet. However, there are clear indications of the Young Poet's emotional and spiritual state—it seems he is quite sad, lonely, and perhaps even frustrated. Here again is a possible reason why the *Letters* have achieved such universal resonance and popularity. The implied depression of the Young Poet is something many readers, artist or otherwise, can identify with.

Ultimately, these two letters embody two of the book's key themes—the importance of solitude, and the need to live life. Letter 5 plainly indicates Rilke has spent considerable amounts of time exploring and absorbing the sights and sounds and smells and tastes of the city, and then, in contemplation, has come to a degree of understanding about what it all means. In short, for Rilke—and through him for the Young Poet, and others—life has no meaning without contemplation, and contemplation has no meaning without life. Meanwhile, Rilke urges in Letter 6 that the Young Poet embrace his solitude rather than fight it, re-iterating another of the core themes of the book. Through solitude and contemplation, truth can become more easily understood.

Section 5

Section 5 Summary and Analysis

Letter 7 - "Rome, May 14, 1904" Once again, the letter begins with Rilke's apologies for the delay in answering the Young Poet's letter, and once again the delay is attributed to ill health. The letter continues with Rilke's pleased and complimentary commentary on a sonnet sent to him by the Young Poet—he writes that the sonnet is simple and true, clearly the Poet's own unique creation and very much a pleasure to read. Rilke writes he is sending a copy of the sonnet in his own hand, saying it is important for poets to receive their work in such a fashion (see "Quotes," p. 67).

Rilke once again comments on the issue of solitude, indicating the Young Poet has expressed a desire to leave his solitude. Rilke writes that while it might be tempting and easy to do so, true growth only happens as the result of an experience of what is difficult (see "Quotes," p. 67-68). He then offers love as an example of this principle, writing at length about how difficult it is to truly experience love and how rewarding that experience ultimately becomes as the result of that difficulty. He suggests that young people who rush into experiences of love, in all their passion and desperation and hunger, are selling themselves and their experiences short, adding that love (like all experiences) takes time to come to its fullest, deepest, expression. He speaks of how humanity is slowly moving to a more universal understanding and acceptance of that aspect of love, writing that the female gender will one day become the leaders and teachers of that understanding. "Women," Rilke writes, "in whom life lingers and dwells more immediately, more fruitfully, and more confidently, must surely have become riper and more human in their depths than light, easygoing man, who ... arrogant and hasty, undervalues what he thinks he loves." The shifting of emphasis from male to female perspectives on love will, Rilke suggests, bring love and relationship to its truest and fullest meaning and purpose, that "... two solitudes protect and border and greet each other."

The first noteworthy components of this section are several relatively clear indications of what, exactly, Young Poet's letter contained. The first is the reference to the sonnet. Rilke makes no reference to its content—there are no clues to its imagery or subject, for example. The second is the implication the Young Poet has begun to follow Rilke's suggestions and is writing from his soul, from his authentic self—it is doubtful Rilke would have described it, as the Poet's own creation, if its source was not evident to him. This idea is reinforced by Rilke's enclosure of a handwritten copy of the sonnet (see "Quotes," p. 67)— Rilke attempts to both congratulate and inspire the Young Poet by helping him see what he has accomplished. The sonnet and Rilke's reaction to it are clear points of movement on the Young Poet's journey of transformation—he has left behind the immaturity of his earlier work begun to write from his inner creative self.

Meanwhile, in the Young Poet's desire to leave his solitude, Rilke finds a springboard for some of his most eloquent, emotional, philosophically-oriented writing in the *Letters*.

Rilke develops a paradox, similar to the one he developed in Section 3, Letter 4. On the one hand, he stresses the importance of living from a place of love, and discusses at length how the true means of living and experiencing love can only be learned through relationships with the female. On the other hand, however, he again stresses the necessity for solitude—again raising the question of how it is possible to experience love in the way he describes if an artist is living in solitude. As was the case with the paradox in Letter 4, in which solitude is again juxtaposed with a contrasting experience —specifically, sexuality—Rilke seems to be advocating a balance. One should learn the truth of love from another, but come to understand the way love works and draw upon its power by contemplating it in solitude.

Section 6

Section 6 Summary and Analysis

Letter 8 - "Borgeby gard, Fladie, Sweden" August 12, 1904 From its opening lines, this letter urges the Young Poet to examine his response to undefined sadnesses in his life. Rilke urges him to consider these sadnesses as opportunities to learn, to discover new truths and new experiences within himself—sadness, he writes, is a response to a loss, and where there is loss there is also the opportunity for something new to come in (see "Quotes," p. 83). He further suggests that sadness is in fact an opportunity to look forward to the future—when the new aspect of life manifests, when that which fills the sadness-inspiring void appears, "we will feel related and close to it in our innermost being." This, he writes, is a necessary part of the human experience —"...what we call fate does not come into us from the outside, but emerges *from* us." He also suggests that going through such experiences in solitude is the only way for this emergence to be fully experienced and accepted. He develops the image of a man abandoned on a mountaintop to illustrate his point—only through solitude, through removal from everyday distractions, can the truth of an experience be accepted and understood. He writes that full humanity is only possible if every experience, including sadness, is embraced, lived, and absorbed. Humans have no reason to be afraid of the world since they have essentially defined the world— humanity cannot be afraid of what it has itself created. Fear, he suggests, is the true source of suffering, the true reason human beings are so rarely fully themselves and the beneficiaries of the power of transformation and acceptance (see "Quotes," p. 92).

After urging the Young Poet to be patient, gentle and watchful with himself as he goes through his dark times, Rilke then urges him to remember that the words and gestures of those who offer him comfort during those times, perhaps referring to himself, are the result of experience. "...life," he writes, "has much trouble and sadness ... if it were otherwise, he would never have been able to find those words."

Here again, Rilke offers a clear indication of in the content of the Young Poet's letter, but does not offer specifics—the reader knows the Young Poet is experiencing sadness, but gleans no understanding of what is triggering that sadness. Ultimately, that lack proves immaterial. Rilke is clearly writing in reference to the state, not the specific circumstances.

In the letter's concluding lines, it is very difficult to escape the sense Rilke is speaking of himself—specifically, when he speaks of those who seek to offer the Young Poet comfort. That this is in fact the case is supported in several ways, perhaps most notably by the fact Rilke is himself a poet and seems to be writing from a place of personal experience. There is the very clear sense he has experienced love, the tension between solitude and sexual expression, and has suffered, contemplated, learned and grown—and intends to continue the process throughout his life. The Introduction supports this impression further. In its brief offering of biographical information, it reveals Rilke as an

emotional man, suffering a breakdown of his marriage when he realizes his demanding need for solitude cannot be ignored or downplayed. The reader is also told Rilke struggled all his life with the tension between his need for solitude and his parallel need for sexual expression. In short, Rilke lived the life he urges the Young Poet, here and throughout the *Letters,* to embrace, contemplate and understand.

Section 7

Section 7 Summary and Analysis

Letter 9 - "Furubork, Jonsered, in Sweden, November 4, 1904" In this brief letter, Rilke urges the Young Poet to be patient, and to trust in the process of life, since life, Rilke suggests, "is always right." He answers the Young Poet's specific questions about how to deal with doubt by suggesting that he learn to use doubt, its questions and its uncertainties, as a guide and a tool for further exploration. He also refers to the way feelings can be an important guide and tool, suggesting that anything that intensifies feeling (anything, that is, other than intoxication or muddiness) is ultimately good for the artist's soul, and then concludes the letter with a reference to the copy of one of his own poems he is enclosing. In the poem, Rilke writes, he speaks further of "life and death and of how both are glorious."

Letter 10 - "Paris, the day after Christmas, 1908" This letter begins with Rilke's apologies for not having written sooner, and for not writing at any length—he describes himself as having been too busy living and working to even prepare for Christmas. Most of the letter is taken up with his congratulations to the Young Poet for having found himself in a line of work (the military) which encourages mental, spiritual and emotional solitude even within a crowd. He writes that such solitude is rarely found or approved of in others in the so-called creative professions (journalism, criticism, even literature), and expresses his happiness that the Young Poet has found a life in which he can be "solitary and courageous, somewhere in a rugged reality."

In these two letters, the book comes full circle, giving a clear sense of simultaneous beginning and end. Firstly, the last letter is written from the same place as the first—Paris. Secondly, this letter contains a poem to which the Young Poet is invited to respond—in the same way his response to Rilke's other poems inspired him to write in the first place. In other words, the *Letters* (and the Young Poet's understanding of Rilke) begins and ends with Rilke's poetry. The inclusion of the poem also relates to Rilke's earlier reference (Letter 3) that he cannot afford to send the Young Poet his poems. On the earlier occasion he refers to being unable to send a book of poems, and here he refers to sending a magazine, somewhat more manageable in terms of cost. Rilke, however, seems to have come full circle—from relative poverty to relative affluence. Perhaps the most important aspect, however, is Rilke ending the *Letters* with the same gesture as the Young Poet began them—with the sending of a work of creation and the request (in this case implied but nonetheless present) for commentary. Finally, a circle also closes with Rilke's reference to the poem's subject matter—life and death, the beginnings and endings of the cycle of life. It is interesting to consider what might be considered dying for the Young Poet—resistance to solitude, perhaps, or his period of apprenticeship to Rilke—and what might be coming to life—the full experience of his creative soul, or perhaps a relationship of equals between the two artists).

Letter 10, meanwhile, develops another of Rilke's apparent paradoxes—in this case, his reference to how solitude can be found within crowds and activity. Rilke seems to think that a work environment, even one as regimented as the military, can become a kind of armor, a protection of the precious internal, if the Young Poet (and artists like him) can come to experience it as such.

Characters

The Young Poet

Rainer Maria Rilke

Professor Horacek

Jens Peter Jacobsen

Richard Dehmel

Auguste Rodin

God

Men

Women

The Self

Objects/Places

Military Academies

According to the translator's Introduction, both Rilke and the Young Poet attended military academies in their youth, where both experienced struggle between their soul-based, poetic inclinations and their body-based, unquestioning and unemotional educations. The Introduction also comments that the man who brought them together, Professor Horacek (see "Important People") taught both men during their time at their respective military schools. In other words, military academies play important roles in the lives and creative development of both Rilke and the Young Poet.

Paris

The capital of France is one of several cities from which Rilke writes his letters. It is important to note that, for many, Paris at the time the letters were written (the early 1900's) was an important center for artistic and creative activity and innovation. Rilke wrote the first and last letters of the book from Paris. This fact may have two different symbolic values. The first is as a manifestation of Paris being, as it were, the beginning and the end of artistic expression at the time the letters were written. The second, and perhaps more relevant, is that at the point of the first and last letters, the Young Poet is at both the end of an old journey and the beginning of a new one—the end of an old experience of being, the beginning of a new, exciting, enticing, way of seeing, feeling and creating.

Viareggio

This Italian community, described in Rilke's letters as being just outside Pisa, is the second city from which Rilke corresponds with the Young Poet. For Rilke, Viareggio was a place where he could nurse himself back to health after one of his apparently frequent illnesses.

Worpswede

This German community, described as being just outside Bremen, is yet another city from which Rilke wrote. By the time Rilke writes from this community, there is the sense that he experiences at least some degree of physical restlessness, perhaps a manifestation of a spiritual or emotional restlessness.

Rome

The capital of Italy is described by Rilke in several letters as being a source of unhappiness and sadness, and as a manifestation of the human condition of living in a dead past rather than a present suffused with living nature. Rilke's presence in Rome, and its vivid effect on him, is the catalyst for his longest and most passionate letters.

Sweden

Rilke writes two letters from two different communities in Sweden, one of which is a long commentary on the nature and value of sadness (Letter 8) and the other of which is a shorter commentary on the nature and value of doubt.

The Bible

The Bible is referenced by Rilke in Letter 2 as one of the two works of literature he keeps constantly in his presence. He makes no clear, specific reference as to why, but it is possible to infer that he, like many other writers before and since, finds inspiration in the Bible's stories (both the stories themselves and the way in which they are told), and the spiritual truths defined by those stories.

Books

Books (Rilke's, those of other authors, those in which the Young Poet's writings are published) are referenced throughout the *Letters.* Books are manifestations of the spiritual truths referred to by Rilke throughout his letters. They are the product of the creativity, solitude, nature, and love he defines as being so essential to life and to art.

The Young Poet's Poems

The work of the Young Poet is referred to by Rilke several times throughout the book. The reader can see his poems as manifestations of the stages of the Young Poet's spiritual quest. For example, the description in Section 1, Letter 1 of the poems as juvenile and under-developed is in fact a description of the Young Poet himself. His first letter to Rilke is a reaching out, an expression of the conscious hope that the older, more experienced poet can help his work mature, and the sub-conscious hope that he can do the same for his creative soul. Then, the fact that the Young Poet's work seems to be missing (Section 4, Letter 6) can be seen as a sign that the Young Poet is himself missing, lost to himself, wandering in his unaccustomed solitude, wavering between seemingly conflicting definitions of himself and his work. Rilke's complimentary reference to the sonnet (Section 5, Letter 7) represents a stage of completion for the Young Poet, a point of beginning at which he is starting to understand and manifest Rilke's guidance. Finally, Rilke's returning a handwritten copy of the sonnet to the Young

Poet makes the metaphorical suggestion that the true value of a work of art comes in the way it can be absorbed, understood, and transformed by others without its essence (a distillation of the artist's experience) being changed.

The Military

The military manifests in two clearly defined ways in *Letters to a Young Poet*. At the beginning of the book, it comes across as a source of fear and confusion for Rilke and the Young Poet alike, while Rilke's first letter suggests that the Young Poet finds himself shaken up by his experiences with the armed forces. As the letters continue, however, the military's image softens, becoming for Rilke a trigger and an opportunity for meditation and self-exploration. As the letters conclude, Rilke depicts the military as a kind of armor, a protection for the Young Poet's inner, spiritual solitude, his connection with his inner, creative self. A tantalizing question raised by the end of the book is whether the Young Poet himself has come to see it that way.

Themes

The Relationship between Creativity, Sexuality and Nature

This theme is one of Rilke's two principal themes, with several of the letters exploring the connection between these three aspects of human existence. They are all, in Rilke's perspective, manifestations of the essential human soul, and its core connection to the ways and workings of being human. He never makes the statement outright, but conveys this attitude through his repeated urging that the Young Poet open himself to his creativity, his own sexuality, and human sexuality in general, and to nature. These urgings are all expressed in the context of Rilke's belief that true, transcendent art can only manifest and be understood if it springs from a connection to these facets of the human soul. This thematic premise is supported by Rilke's repeated urgings that the Young Poet not think too much about what Rilke is writing, and about the changes the Young Poet is experiencing as a result of that writing. Again and again he urges the Young Poet to go deeper than superficial experiences of life, to go beneath thought and delve into feeling and inspiration. The process of growth, Rilke contends, is ultimately spiritually grounded, and therefore intuitive and emotional. It can take, Rilke contends, a lifetime to even begin, let alone complete. Throughout the book, Rilke is encouraging the Young Poet, and through him the reader, to open himself to an alternative means of perceiving and living reality. He invites him to explore and understand his soul in a new way, unconnected to the definitions of soul offered by religion. To Rilke, the only valid definition of soul is that which connects it most intimately and instinctually to every act of living.

The Value of Solitude

This is Rilke's second principal theme, and is reiterated again and again throughout the book. At the core of this particular thematic perspective is Rilke's belief that the connections between creativity, sexuality and nature can only become apparent, accessible, and livable if the Young Poet opens himself to them in solitude. Rilke makes no explicit distinction between being alone and being lonely, but to understand his thematic contention such a distinction must be made. Being alone simply means being without outside influences—friends, family, and stimuli such as books or conversation. Outside influences can also include distracting thoughts and emotions focused on the external. In Rilke's experience and perspective, being alone is a kind of mediation, a state of being in which the self and the soul become detached from that which is external in order to allow the internal to both surface and manifest. Loneliness, on the other hand, might best be described as a sadness, a loss, a sense of abandonment associated with being alone. In other words, loneliness is a negative judgment about aloneness, whereas pure aloneness is the most transcendent, affirming, inspiring experience an artist can have. Rilke's contention, expressed throughout the book, is that both the transcendencies of the human experience and the art arising from

contemplation of those transcendencies, can emerge only through solitude, through aloneness.

The Importance of Living Life

The third key theme of the book might, on the one hand, be seen as both paradoxical (when considered in juxtaposition with the thematic focus on solitude) and harmonious (when considered in juxtaposition with the thematic focus on the relationship between creativity, sexuality and nature). In one letter Rilke writes of the value of withdrawing from life (finding solitude), while in another he writes of the importance of engaging with life (exploring sexuality). The point is not made to suggest Rilke is contradicting himself, or is confused. Rather, he is making the suggestion that life and art cannot be complete without one or the other. Solitude has no value of life is not also lived, while actively living has no value without solitude and the ability to contemplate the depths of life's experiences.

It is interesting to consider, in this context, the way the letters reflect this thematic perspective, not only in terms of their philosophical explorations but also in descriptions of Rilke's life. Rilke makes many excuses for his tardiness in writing to the Young Poet—he has been ill, traveling, busy writing, Christmas shopping. In other words, Rilke is living his life, with full engagement and attention. When he is sick, he is fully sick. When he is working, he is fully working. When he is shopping, he is fully shopping—and then, in solitude, he writes letters in order to reflect upon what he has been living. For a particularly clear example of how this thematic perspective manifests, see Section 4, Letter 5.

Style

Perspective

The author of the *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke, was an established, well reputed poet himself when the letters were written. The book's Introduction, however, describes him as being only twenty-seven at the time the first letter was —not even ten years older than the Young Poet to whom the letters are addressed. The Introduction also comments that Rilke was, in both his life and his work, at a point of transition. This suggests that many of the ideas and beliefs Rilke refers to in his letters are perhaps transitional thoughts of his own, understandings reached as the result of deep contemplation of his own transitory experiences. In other words, he is writing from the perspective of his own spiritual and creative experiences and understandings, both lived and considered. His reasons for writing are therefore simultaneously simple and complex. He writes these letters firstly because he was asked—the Young Poet wrote him asking him for guidance, and Rilke responds. Secondly, he writes in the way he does because he identifies on many levels with the Young Poet. As discussed in the Introduction, Rilke also attended a military school, and experienced a similar discontinuity between the demands of the school and the inclinations of the soul as the Young Poet. He also experienced similar struggles between what he felt ordered to do (by society, as represented by the school) and called to do (by his soul and artistic sensibilities). Rilke, in writing his letters, is therefore both cleansing himself of past sufferings and using what he has learned through contemplation to illuminate, and perhaps ease, the sufferings of another.

It is important to note what this book has become in the years since it was first published in the early 1900's. Rilke's words to the Young Poet have been read by countless artists, and indeed other non-creative individuals, as also having meaning for them. His specific words addressed to a particular individual have often been perceived as having universal meaning and general philosophical value. Rilke's audience has expanded far beyond the Young Poet for whom the letters were originally intended, and over the years his words have become relevant to all those struggling with issues of identity, fulfillment, and how to live truly.

Tone

The book's overall tone is one of compassion and empathy. Rilke writes able to genuinely identify with the struggles of the Young Poet—there is the sense that he is speaking directly, not loftily or patronizingly, to the man asking for his help. This does not mean, however, that the book is entirely subjective in tone. While Rilke's observations seem fully and deeply grounded in personal experience, he writes in such a way as to suggest that these experiences, and the truths gleaned from an in-depth consideration of those experiences, are universal. In short, he writes subjectively, but with an objective, detached, contemplative quality. This blending of tonal quality gives

the book a sense of dispassionate intimacy, of a carefully considered honesty that is perhaps the main reason why the book has become so popular with artists and non-artists alike. It is a kind of emotional philosophy, a non-judgmental rule book, that essentially says to the reader "This is what I've lived, this is what I've understood, and I urge you to think about what I've said" without actually saying "You must live as I have done!" The writing is welcoming, not dictatorial, and warm without being intrusive or cloying. The surface words of Rilke's *Letters* give a relatively small indication of the hugeness of feeling, belief and experience beneath.

Structure

The book is composed of an Introduction, written by the translator, and ten letters of varying lengths, written on various subjects, and composed in various European cities. The primary virtue of this structural form is that, aside from the Introduction, it allows the letters to speak for themselves. There is no commentary, no analysis, and only one or two footnotes—Rilke's words and beliefs are presented as clearly and as objectively as a translation can allow. The principal drawback to this structure is that it contains no explicit content from the Young Poet—his letters, the questions and comments and concerns that triggered Rilke's responses are unavailable to the reader. He is only able to understand the Young Poet and his dilemmas from Rilke's perspective. This, however, has a positive side, allowing those who read the book to imagine that Rilke is speaking to them.

Meanwhile, the Introduction provides valuable insight into the context in which the letters were written. It should be noted that different editions of the *Letters* may provide different Introductions, some of which will contain essential information and some of which will not. Ultimately, the simply presented ten letters perform the simple, essential task of any structure—present and frame the author's essential perspective in the most effective and engaging way possible.

While the book is non-fiction and lacks a traditional plot, it does have a degree of traditional narrative structure. Its central character, the Young Poet, undergoes a journey of transformation as the result of his dialogue with Rilke. In his first letter, the Young Poet is clearly unsure and anxious, and has little or no experience of a true, self-defined creative source. Over the course of the letters, Rilke's writing indicates that the Young Poet seems to be having difficulty reaching and tapping into that source, but does seem to be attempting to apply the techniques for connection that Rilke suggests. In other words the Young Poet, as heroes in novels (and well structured biographies) do, is striving to achieve a goal—creative enlightenment. His obstacles, again like those encountered by heroes in novels, challenge him to strive harder and Rilke to push him harder—a plot, of sorts, supported and defined by structure. In his final letter, Rilke implies the Young Poet has achieved a certain degree of enlightenment, and that he is able to both understand more and apply more than he did at the beginning of their correspondence. Rilke's writing suggests that Young Poet, having established a connection with his own personal creative voice and written a poem Rilke says is undeniably his own, has completed a process of education and transformation. The

implication, as the letters draw to a close, is that while this stage of the Young Poet's development is reaching fruition, his true creative life is just beginning. This is a common structural conceit found in many novels, and indeed of other, more traditional narrative forms - the ending that is also a beginning.

Quotes

"Nothing touches a work of art so little as words of criticism: they always result in more or less fortunate misunderstandings," p. 3.

"Things aren't all so tangible and sayable as people would usually have us believe; most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered, and more unsayable than all other things are works of art, those mysterious existences, whose life endures beside our own small, transitory life," p. 4.

"So, dear Sir, I can't give you any advice but this: to go into yourself and see how deep the place is from which your life flows; at its source you will find the answer to the question of whether you *must* create," p. 9.

"...the creator must be a world for himself and must find everything in himself and in Nature, to whom his whole life is devoted," p. 10.

"...ultimately, and precisely in the deepest and mist important matters, we are unspeakably alone; and many things must happen, many things must go right, a whole constellation of events must be fulfilled, for one human being to successfully advise or help another," p. 14.

"Works of art are of an infinite solitude, and no means of approach is so useless as criticism. Only love can touch and hold them and be fair to them. Always trust *yourself* and your own feeling ... allow your judgments their own silent, undisturbed development, which, like all progress, must come from deep within and cannot be forced or hastened," p. 23.

"...the artist's experience lies so unbelievably close to the sexual, to its pain and its pleasure, that the two phenomena are really just different forms of one and the same longing and bliss," p. 26.

"If you trust in Nature, in what is simple in Nature, in the small Things that hardly anyone sees and that can so suddenly become huge, immeasurable ... then everything will become easier for you, more coherent and somehow more reconciling ..." pp. 33-34.

"...mental creation too arises from the physical, is of one nature with it and only like a softer, more enraptured and more eternal repetition of bodily delight ..." p. 38.

"...perhaps the sexes are more akin than people think, and the great renewal of the world will perhaps consist in one phenomenon: that man and woman, freed from all mistaken feelings and aversions, will seek each other not as opposites but as brother and sister, as neighbors, and will unite as *human beings*, in order to bear in common, simply, earnestly, and patiently, the heavy sex that has been laid upon them ..." p. 41 (a).

"...love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain it causes you," p. 41 (b).

"...believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it," p. 43

"... to walk inside yourself and meet no-one for hours ... to be solitary as you were when you were a child, when the grownups walked around involved with matters that seemed large and important ... and ... you didn't understand a thing about what they were doing," pp. 54-55.

"... I know that it is important and full of new experience to rediscover a work of one's own in someone else's handwriting. Read the poem as if you had never seen it before, and you will feel in your innermost being how very much it is your own," p. 67.

"...we must trust in what is difficult; everything alive trusts in it, everything in Nature grows and defends itself any way it can and is spontaneously itself, tries to be itself at all costs and [all] against all opposition," pp. 67-68.

"...[our sadnesses] are the moments when something new has entered us, something unknown; our feelings grow mute in shy embarrassment, everything in us withdraws, a silence arises, and the new experience, which no one knows, stands in the midst of it all and says nothing," p. 83

"Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love," p. 92.

"One must be so careful with names ... it is so often the *name* of an offense that a life shatters upon, not the nameless and personal action itself, which was perhaps a quite definite necessity of that life and could have been absorbed by it without any trouble," p. 95.

Topics for Discussion

In what ways can the lessons offered by Rilke apply to works of art other than the literary? How can what he says about, for example, understanding the essence of things and digging deeply into the self apply to the work of singers, or actors, or painters, or dancers?

Debate the validity of Rilke's comments on the relationship between sexuality and creativity in Section 2 and throughout the book. Are these comments accurate or inaccurate? Explore further parallels between sexuality and creativity—consider factors such as communication, vulnerability, intimacy, and sensuality and others as necessary.

Consider Rilke's comments on the nature of male (Section 2, Letter 3) and female (Section 5, Letter 7) sexuality. Are these perceptions appropriate or accurate? Are they manifestations of a kind of reverse sexism? What other differences exist between male and female sexuality, in the way sexuality manifests, is expressed, is communicated? In what ways might these differences manifest in art created by males and females?

Discuss Rilke's observations about the nature of God (Section 4, Letter 6). In what ways do they reflect or tie in with his observations about creativity, solitude, sexuality? In what ways are they similar or different to Christian or non-Christian perspectives? Debate whether the differences in perspective render these observations invalid.

Consider Rilke's comments about the relationship between growth and opposition (see "Quotes," pp. 67-68). Offer and define specific examples of this principle from the plant or animal worlds, and also from human experience (physical, emotional, spiritual, creative). Discuss what the experience of life (human, animal, plant, spiritual, for example) might be if there were no opposition or challenge.

It has been argued that the purpose of military training, and a key function of military service, is to remove considerations of individuality and self from at least the surface experience of a soldier—to make self and feeling and soul a much lesser consideration than duty, selflessness and service. Within the context of this premise, debate whether Rilke's contention at the conclusion of Letter 10 that the Young Poet, now deep in military service, is actually in a situation where his deepest soul is being preserved and protected ... or whether he is in a situation where that soul is being overwhelmed and ultimately destroyed.

Consider the various ways Rilke urges the Young Poet to accept his feelings and experiences, use them as a means of knowing himself, and through doing so become more adept at creating unique, genuine, transcendent art. Is it possible that by making similar points throughout the letters, Rilke is suggesting that artistic creation is, in fact, a re-action rather than an action? Debate both sides of this issue—is art an action or a reaction? In what ways is it both? In what ways is it neither?

Debate the validity of Rilke's statement that life "is always right" (Letter 9). Is it or is it not? Under what circumstances is it difficult, easy or essential to maintain this belief?