Lautréamont's Maldoror: Translated by Alexis Lykiard Study Guide

Lautréamont's Maldoror: Translated by Alexis Lykiard by Comte de Lautréamont

BOOKRAGS

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Book I, Stanzas 1-9

Book I, Stanzas 1-9 Summary

Stanza 1: The narrator warns the reader about reading the poems that follow. He says that if the reader does not approach them with a "rigorous logic and a tautness of mind equal at least to his wariness" that the book will corrupt him and make him like its subject, Maldoror. The narrator urges the reader, therefore, to stop reading and close the book forever.

Stanza 2: The narrator promises that hatred, imagined here as an odor, will please the reader.

Stanza 3: Maldoror was a good person during his early years but when he realized that he had, actually, been born filled with evil, his life turned in a different direction. At first, he tried to repress his true nature but in time, he could not hold it back any longer and embraced his evil heart.

Stanza 4: The narrator explains that the purpose of the work is to exhibit the delights one might have in cruelty. Such a delight, he claims, is not reserved only for particularly evil men; rather, all men, even if they do not admit it, feel the same pleasures.

Stanza 5: The narrator—now Maldoror, apparently—remarks on how evil all men are, though the motivations for their actions vary. He has seen men commit the most horrific acts. This sinfulness is so universal that he begs God to show him a single man that is good.

Stanza 6: Maldoror recommends the reader to try growing out his fingernails to be very long and then using them to tear open the breast of a young child, not to kill him, but simply to make him bleed and cry. The blood and tears of such an innocent soul, he claims, are tastier than anything else on earth. He suggests blind-folding the child before doing this, in order to later remove the blind-fold and pretend to be the child's savior. To be thus hated and loved, the narrator claims, is the "greatest happiness which can be conceived" (35). Afterward, he says to take the child to the hospital and thus be applauded by society at large for an apparent act of beneficence.

Stanza 7: Maldoror recalls making a pact with Prostitution. A giant glow-worm appeared to him and showed him the tombstone of a youth who died from tuberculosis. At Maldoror's feet, a naked woman—Prostitution—appeared, evidently the cause of the child's disease. The glow-worm, who claims to be in a position of judgment, urged Maldoror to kill Prostitution, but Maldoror instead killed the Glow-Worm. It was at that moment that Maldoror definitively abandoned virtue.

Stanza 8: Maldoror likens himself to dogs who roam the countryside at night, barking out into the universe, cursing everything. They are motivated by an unquenchable

desire that leads to them turning on any living thing they see—even one another. Maldoror, too, feels this infinite desire.

Stanza 9: Maldoror contrasts humanity with the ocean. The ocean, he claims, is superior in many ways. For example, while man claims to be beautiful, though only out of pride, the ocean truly is beautiful and yet makes no attempt to convince others of it. The ocean is also stable and always the same, in contrast to man's mercurial, capricious nature. The ocean, though much larger than man, is also much simpler. The profundity of the human soul can, perhaps, never be fully explored and, while the ocean is perhaps to deep to ever plumb, it cannot compare to the tangled mess of the human condition.

Book I, Stanzas 1-9 Analysis

It is important for the reader to keep in mind the date of these poems' publication. Maldoror, who died in 1870, completed the work somewhere between 1868 and 1869. For a book as old as this, it is rather surprising to find something which is able to still shock modern sensibilities; the effect must have been many times greater for his original audience. Consider, for example, Stanza 6 in which Maldoror describes, in great detail, torturing a child by clawing him with fingernails. It is tempting to think that this is simply gratuitous—and, indeed, perhaps it might be to an extent—but there is probably a principled reason behind Lautreamont's attempt to revolt and disgust his audience. He is writing in late-19th-century France, a period and country in which secular thinking was far advanced in comparison with many other Western countries. The French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic period had largely stripped France of its deep religious ties, especially among intellectuals, and many of the revolutionary ideas persisted for decades after the Revolution had ended.

One of the logical consequences of the decline of Christianity among post-Revolutionary intellectuals was a re-examination of conventional morality. Many thinkers became enamored with the philosophy of liberalism, a political and moral ideology which emphasizes individual liberty and rights. While Maldoror certainly does not have much regard for others' rights—he is a murderer, after all—his sympathy for certain "sins" like prostitution (cf. 7) and other "victim-less crimes" might be an indication of Lautreamont's personal moral philosophy.

Book I, Stanzas 10-14

Book I, Stanzas 10-14 Summary

Stanza 10: Maldoror predicts what his death will be like. He does not think that he will be surrounded by priests, for he does not expect to persist after the death of his body; even if he did, he has no hope for mercy. He imagines a last conversation with the whole of existence. Nature, he thinks, will wonder at his existence, for he is a new kind of violation of its laws. Though he feels at odds with the natural world, he does not bear a grudge as a result. Instead, he seems to view it as a kind of competition, in which both sides are pitted against one another, each recognizing that only one can emerge victorious.

Stanza 11: A family—mother, father, and son—are gathered around a table at night when Maldoror sneaks in to watch. He notes, with wonder, how happy they are, and decides that he should leave. The aura of his presence lingers, though, and the family begins to feel a shadow come over their usually happy souls. The family hears cries in the distance but cannot tell where they are coming from or who is causing them. While they pray to God for protection against this evil force, Maldoror returns and talks to the child. He tries to seduce him into sin, promising a luxurious life full of every imaginable pleasure. When the boy refuses, Maldoror becomes angry and strangles him. The mother dies at the same moment, leaving the father alone to mourn the loss of his family.

Stanza 12: Maldoror, now in Norway, finds a grave-digger with whom he wishes to speak. The grave-digger, though, says he is too busy with his "serious work." Maldoror scoffs at the idea that digging a grave is serious work, but the grave-digger defends himself. He says most occupations are quite natural and comprehensible; they do not invite the doer to any kind of metaphysical reflection about the universe. Grave-digging, however, is intimately tied with the question of mortality: Does the soul persist after death? He does not pretend to know the answer to the question, though he does provide evidence that there is life after death: He says he sees the corpses rise out of their graves every night for fresh air.

Maldoror starts digging instead of the grave-digger, whom has been overwhelmed by emotion. Maldoror tells the grave-digger that he is probably hallucinating and urges him to trust in God, who has ennobled man with the ability to endure sufferings. The grave-digger notes how insincere Maldoror seems while he gives this pious advice. He also sense an immense sadness about him and decides to ask who he is and where he is from. Maldoror is annoyed by these questions and stops digging the grave. He asks to be undressed and set inside of it, but then claims to be joking. He starts to leave but the grave-digger, seeing how tired he is, insists that he rest at his house. He guesses that Maldoror has some dark history but promises that he will not ask about it. On the way to his cottage, the grave-digger tells him about the wide variety of people that he has seen buried, a topic which delights Maldoror.

Stanza 13: Maldoror meets a talking toad. Maldoror is in awe of the toad, whom he describes as a superior being who has graced the earth with his presence. He begs the toad not to leave, but if he must leave, he begs to leave with him. The toad responds with spite. He hates Maldoror, he says, and especially because of his pride. He says if Maldoror really believes he is as smart as he says, he should leave the earth and travel to one of those cosmic spheres where such immense intelligence is more common. He says goodbye to Maldoror, whom he blames as the cause of his death, and leaves the earth.

Stanza 14: The narrator announces the end of the first "song" and promises that the best will come in the chapters to come. He encourages the "young reader" not to despair, telling him that he has a friend in the vampire.

Book I, Stanzas 10-14 Analysis

Stanza 10 both clarifies and confuses the issue of Maldoror's theological beliefs. So far in the book, it seems that he does believe in God even if he distrusts and hates him. This stanza, however, opens the possibility that God and the afterlife are purely fictional, for Maldoror speculates that after he dies he might just cease to exist altogether. A possible interpretation of the other references to God would be that they are referring to the social conception of God, a concept which Maldoror (and, perhaps, Lautreamont) believe leads to all of the crimes with which Maldoror charges God. Employing this rhetorical strategy has the benefit—a dubious benefit, some might argue—of shocking the audience. While atheism was hardly a popular belief system in 19th century France, it was common enough among intellectuals that it probably had lost some of its edge. Blasphemy, though, such as pervades these poems, would certainly shock many of Lautreamont's reader and therefore he may have chosen to employ it to symbolically argue for his atheist philosophy.

Along these lines, Lautreamont also frequently uses grotesque symbols to portray God. While such a strategy might not produce the same revolting effect as blasphemy, there is certainly something daring about attempting God, for example, as a fat, talking toad, as Lautreamont does in Stanza 13.

Book II, Stanzas 1-9

Book II, Stanzas 1-9 Summary

Stanza 1: Maldoror, the narrator says, is a kind of censure for the reader and humanity as a whole. By being openly evil, he implicitly condemns every person on earth, for all are at least implicitly evil.

Stanza 2: The narrator tries to continue writing but finds his hand stopped by some supernatural force. Further, lightning bolts are starting to strike the narrator. He supposes it is the work of God, whom the narrator derides and chastises for treating him so harshly. After bandaging up his wounds, he resolves to continue writing and, in fact, does so.

Stanza 3: Maldoror curses God for all of the suffering he causes on Earth. He points out all of the earthquakes, floods, famines, and other horrible events, all obviously in contradiction with a good-natured deity. Moreover, he blames God for not revealing to man the mysteries of existence.

Stanza 4: Maldoror watches a horse-drawn bus go by. It is inhabited by a small number of corpse-like men, who gaze vacantly into the dust. As it speeds away, a dirty, street-child chases after it, desperately, a vainly, trying to catch it. He eventually trips on a rock and injures himself. A "ragman" comes by to help him. Maldoror then curses humanity for mistreating the boy in such a way and God for creating men.

Stanza 5: On his daily walk, Maldoror used to be followed by a little girl, about ten-years-old. One day she tried to talk to him, eager to ask him something of great importance, it seemed, but instead just asked him for the time. He never saw her again but wonders about her apparent innocence. He imagines that beneath her young, angelic experience there was a hardened craftiness, scheming to somehow take advantage of Maldoror. The more he considers the possibility, the more plausible it seems, such that he cannot even fathom that the girl is really what she seemed. Angered, he imagines that if he were to ever see the girl again, he would kill her and graphically depicts how he would do so by throwing her against a wall.

Stanza 6: Maldoror finds a young boy sitting on a bench. He asks the boy what he is thinking about and he tells Maldoror that he is thinking about heaven. Maldoror tries to convince him to stop thinking about heaven. He says that since heaven is made by the same creator who made Earth it will have all of the same injustices of Earth. The only solution, he says, is to take the law into one's own hand, abandon morality, and live how one pleases. After giving him a lengthy, impassioned argument, he notices the boy has come down with a fever, but supposes he will recover in a few days.

Stanza 7: There is a hermaphrodite who lives in a flowery grove. He has the luxury of such a leisurely lifestyle because he was once captured by a group of bandits and

violently mistreated. The city felt so bad for him that they awarded him with a pension. The hermaphrodite, though, was not made any happier as a result of the pension. He still felt an inescapable loneliness and wished he could go to some place where everyone was like him. The narrator—Maldoror, probably—begs him to escape into his dreams, the only place he can find happiness.

Stanza 8: Maldoror talks about his childhood. He was born deaf and was able to learn how to communicate only with a great amount of difficulty. One day he started contemplating the heavens and had a vision of God sitting on a throne of "human excrement and gold" (85) eating live men. He claimed the right to eat men on the basis that he was their creator and, as such, had the right to do whatever he pleased. The sight was such a shock that he uttered a cry loud enough that it pierced through his deafness. His deafness was cured but now he associated the grotesque image of God with everything he heard and, as such, decided not to talk to anyone. He begs, too, the reader, should he ever be near him, to remain silent.

Stanza 9: Maldoror describes a certain insect which men keep. It requires a significant amount of care which is carried out at great expense. When it gets to a certain age, it is killed in order to spare it the miseries of old age. Men keep this insect out of a religious reverence and even sacrifice to it. Maldoror urges men to stop worshiping this insect god, saying that it does nothing but hold them back and waste precious resources.

Book II, Stanzas 1-9 Analysis

One of Maldoror's main criticisms of God is that God allows (and perhaps even directly causes) any number of horrible things to happen to people: earthquakes, famines, floods, plagues, and so on. This criticism seems to be a literary adaptation of one of the classic arguments against God's existence, the so-called problem of evil. According to this argument, God's existence is refuted by the existence of suffering, for God, according to the standard theological definitions, is both powerful enough to stop suffering and good enough to want to do so.

So far, Lautreamont has shown a great interest in children. They feature in three stanzas in this section (5, 6, and 8) and in Stanzas 6 and 11 in the first book; they will continue to feature prominently in the poems to come. Part of this interest is probably simply that readers will be more outraged when crimes are committed against children. However, in the 19th century there was also a popular idea that children are innocents who have not yet been tainted by society. Since religion and society are closely connected entities, it is no wonder that Lautreamont would be interested in reaching these children before they become corrupted. Such an in interest is rather directly treated in Stanza 6 and it is perhaps Maldoror's intellectual purity as a child in Stanza 9 which enables him to avoid ever becoming religious.

Book II, Stanzas 10-16

Book II, Stanzas 10-16 Summary

Stanza 10: Maldoror praises mathematics, a science which he thinks is superior to humanity. He denounces anyone who remains willfully ignorant of mathematics, for he says in such ignorance there is an implicit disdain of mathematics. Maldoror particularly loves how orderly mathematics in, especially in contrast to the chaotic affairs of men. Mathematics is also always the same, from one eon to the next, while men and their societies are undergoing constant change. He credits mathematics with making him a wiser man, a gift he has used to commit all sorts of misdeeds, even murder. He prays to mathematics—which has become, for him, a kind of goddess—that he might always turn to her when he wearies of observing the injustice of man and God.

Stanza 11: Maldoror addresses a lamp hanging in a cathedral and tries to persuade it to stop serving God and man, both of whom, he says, it owes nothing. He is angered when the lamp does not respond to him and, thus, picks up a stone and hurls it at the lamp, breaking the chain which suspends it from the ceiling. When he goes to gather up the fallen lamp, it becomes angel, though simultaneously maintaining its lamp-like appearance. The two of them fight. The angel injures Maldoror with an invisible sword, but the wounds do not seem to deter him. Maldoror draws the angel's face close to him and licks him with his diseased tongue, blackening the angelic face with gangrene. The angel flies away and Maldoror, picking up the lamp—now separate, apparently, from the angel—follows outside and watches him ascend to the heavens. The narrator says that every night since that day, one can see a winged lamp flying above the Seine. If it comes near anyone with a guilty conscience, its light goes out.

Stanza 12: Maldoror recalls his thoughts when, as a child, he decided to reject God. He was tired of praying to Him everyday because, first of all, he thought that his prayers could be of no use to a supremely powerful being and, second, he thought that God's actions were often unjust and even cruel, such as when He afflicts some town with an epidemic. For the time being, he is forced by his parents to continue to pray, but he begs God not to include him in His Providence any longer.

Stanza 13: Maldoror sets out to try to find someone who is like him. He meets a man who is so good that he causes flowers to sprout up around him, but sends him away, knowing that the two—moral opposites—can have nothing to do with one another. He meets a beautiful woman who is drawn to his attractive face, but sends her away for the same reason. He then travels to the shore where he watches a large ship sailing into port amidst a fierce storm. The ship is eventually overcome and begins to sink and Maldoror watches as its inhabitants desperately fight for their lives. Maldoror, equipped with a rifle, vows to kill any of the survivors and carries out his promise on a sixteen-year-old who is valiantly swimming to shore. He watches as a group of sharks converge upon the bodies of the drowned passengers. He is especially impressed by a large female shark that arrives. He starts shooting at the sharks and kills several of them

before he swims out and kills the rest—except the female—with a knife. When they are all dead, he and the female shark lock eyes and make love. Maldoror has finally found someone like himself.

Stanza 14: While riding on horseback along the Seine, Maldoror sees a man drowning who looks like his friend, Holzer (whether it actually is Holzer is left ambiguous). He pulls him out of the water and saves his life. He finds the act of mercy to be very rewarding, but perhaps only account of some kind of personal allegiance to Holzer, to whom he has vowed to never commit suicide.

Stanza 15: There are times when man finds himself at odds with his conscience, which he vainly tries to escape. Conscience, as Maldoror imagines it, is like a flock of flying octopi which God sends to Earth to torment man. Out of revenge, then, Maldoror, symbolically, flies up to Heaven in the form of an octopus to confront God and renounce conscience forever. From that point on, the two live in a kind of tense stalemate, each recognizing that the other is his equal and always ready to start fighting again.

Stanza 16: The narrator decides to take a rest from his poetry, thus ending the second book. He recognizes the possibility that his misanthropic poems might incite someone to try to murder him, but he would not care if so: "The atoms of clay may just as well be dispersed in this way as any other" (119).

Book II, Stanzas 10-16 Analysis

Maldoror's tribute to mathematics in Stanza 10 is typical of the 19th century, a period in which many thinkers, especially those in France, elevated reason above faith and almost made it a religious object in its own right—indeed, some of the French Revolutionaries did precisely that. Mathematics is often thought of as a particularly "pure" application of reason, insofar as its laws and theories are deduced using a method which is completely objective and transparent. Philosophy is much more prone to vague reasoning or ambiguous terms. The tribute to mathematics is very similar to the tribute to the ocean in Book I, Stanza 9. In both stanzas, Maldoror complains of humanity's instability and inconsistency.

Stylistically, these stanzas are perhaps the clearest examples so far of Lautreamont's surrealism. It is important to note that Lautreamont is writing before many of the more well-known surrealist authors, like Franz Kafka, published their works and therefore the style would have been especially novel to his audience. The purpose of his surrealism is not obvious, however. Consider, for example, Stanza 15, in which he imagines conscience as a flock of black, flying octopi sent by God to torment man. It is not clear why conscience is represented in this way. In other cases, the imagery has the effect, already mentioned, of degrading what it is meant to represent, as was seen in Book I, Stanza 13 with the talking toad.

Book III

Book III Summary

Stanza 1: Maldoror and his friend, Mario, are traveling on horseback very quickly through a winter storm. They pass a fisherman who believes they are the two brothers of some well-known legend in those parts. The two brothers are the spirits of the earth and the sea, responsible for all kind of natural calamities like earthquakes and storms. It turns out that the fishermen is right. As they travel, Maldoror and Mario, who love one another very much, are eager to make sure the other is safe and comfortable. When Maldoror detects, or thinks that he detects, some sadness in Mario, the spirit of the Earth, Mario responds by saying that he is not sad but admits that is weary of life. However, he does not end his life because he has decided to make it a sustained act of vengeance against God.

Stanza 2: There is a madwoman who dances around town who has a secret that she will share with no one. The narrator discovers this secret one day when he picks up a piece of paper that she drops. The madwoman was the mother of a little girl whom she cherished greatly and for whom she thanked God daily. One day Maldoror found the girl and raped her. He then sent his bulldog upon her but the bulldog was hesitant to kill her since she was already severely wounded. It instead had sex with her. When Maldoror returned and discovered this, he became enraged and stabbed the bulldog with his knife, cutting out one of its eyes, and chased it away. He then returned to the little girl and cut out all of her internal organs, pulling them out through her vagina. A shepherd was witness to what happened but the authorities were never able to figure out who committed the crime.

Stanza 3: Tremdall, a Jew, is walking up a mountain when he sees Maldoror walking somewhere nearby. A dragon with the head of a tiger is approaching him. Maldoror turns into an eagle and the two monsters fight. Tremdall, a perpetual victim of society's injustices, is hoping that Maldoror will be defeated, but Maldoror emerges victorious after ripping the dragon's heart out with his beak.

Stanza 4: God is passed out, drunk, in the world. Various animals come by, most of them cursing him in some way (the lion is the only exception). When man comes by, he defecates on God for three days. When God finally comes to, a beggar passes by and, moved by God's pathetic state, gives him a coin. God is thankful for this act of mercy, for no one realizes how hard it is to create and govern the universe.

Stanza 5: There is a brothel located inside what used to be a convent. Maldoror is observing the building from a distance when he sees one of the prostitutes come out, naked. She is attacked by a group of chickens who rip the flesh from her genitals. Maldoror is intrigued and decides to visit the brothel. On his way, he sees a sign over a bridge warning visitors not to visit the brothel, saying that once a young man entered and never returned. Maldoror's curiosity is piqued even more and, therefore, he goes

inside where he meets a giant hair. The hair explains that he fell out of his master's head when the master, a person of considerable worth, was making love to a prostitute in the brothel, a woman the hair did not believe was worthy of his master. Maldoror continues to listen intently, anxious to discover the identity of the hair's former owner.

After sex, his master was filled with anger and wanted to hurt some body. He called in a young man who was a guest of the brothel and tortured him by flaying his skin. As it turns out, the master is none other than God himself and, as he gets dressed to return to Heaven, the nuns who have been buried in the convent for centuries rise up and surround him. During this ordeal, the young man dies and God leaves for heaven. As the hair is telling this story, God returns and urges him to be quiet. He explains how guilty he has felt after what he did and that he was reproached by Satan for his wickedness. God then turns to Maldoror and threatens him with his claws. Maldoror leaves and changes the sign above the bridge to say how painful it is to keep the secret of what he saw inside the brothel but that he will never reveal it to anyone. He throws the knife away and bemoans how cursed man is to be governed by such a miserable tyrant like God.

Book III Analysis

Stanzas 1 and 4 bring up an issue which has already come up less directly in previous poems: Maldoror's relationship with nature. It would seem logical, at first glance, that Maldoror would be opposed to nature, insofar as it was created by God whom he explicitly hates. Indeed, he does describe himself as violating nature's laws from time to time, as in Book I, Stanza 10. However, elsewhere, he seems to think that nature is, basically, on his side. Consider, for example, how all of the animals (with the significant exception of the lion) deface God's drunken body is Stanza 4. In part, this is probably a metaphor for oppression. Most animals have been placed into a situation in which they must constantly struggle for their existence. The lion alone is at the top of the food chain and therefore, according to Lautreamont, enjoys a certain amount of security. Assuming, however, that Lautreamont is actually an atheist and that he does not really believe God is the creator of nature, it becomes plausible to think that he is making a point about the purity of nature, a point which has already been touched upon in another regard, children.

Book IV, Stanzas 1-4

Book IV, Stanzas 1-4 Summary

Stanza 1: The narrator considers how successful or unsuccessful his inquiry into the injustice of man has been so far. While he does not think he has achieved total success, he does think that he has shed some light on the problem. He then renews his vow to oppose man and his cruelties—for eternity, if necessary.

Stanza 2: Starting with a vision of two towers—which, he says, resemble two baobobs—the narrator goes on a feverish rant about the complexity of the world, humor, and tragedy. He talks at length about the best way to kill a fly and notes that any wise soul will be pleased by discussing it and any other matter, for like everything in the world, there is the potential for a limitless amount of analysis. Though he himself cannot laugh, he urges his reader to always cry whenever he laughs—and if he cannot bring himself to tears, at least urinate—in order to remind himself of the fundamental sadness of the world. He returns to the subject of the two towers and tries to imagine them as part of a mathematical equation but finds it difficult to do so.

Stanza 3: The narrator stumbles upon a man hanging from a gallows by his hair. His hands are tied behind his back but his legs are left free to dangle. He is about to go help the man but hides when he sees two women approaching. He is horrified by the sight—they seem more like apes than humans—and watches in silence as they torture him, first by covering him with tar and then by whipping him with lead whips. After they leave, the narrator takes the man down and finds out what happened. The women—his mother and his wife—are mad because he turned down having sex with his mother. His wife wanted him to do this because she thought that she might receive some reward from his mother if he submitted. He leaves the man in the care of some plowmen.

Stanza 4: The narrator describes the state of his body. He has been laying in one spot for hundreds of years and has lost the use of most of his limbs. Fungus and animals have taken over most of his body. Toads nest in one of his armpits, a chameleon in another. A crab even dwells in his anus, a fact which causes him some significant amount of pain. He continues to exist as part of an ongoing war with God, whom he hates because he believes he is unjust. Man, inspired by some misguided loyalty to God, even stabbed him with a sword long ago, but it did not kill him. He tells the reader that it is pointless to try to convince his son to worship God, for as his son grows older he will grow tired of notions of virtue and piety.

Book IV, Stanzas 1-4 Analysis

The stanzas in this section are perhaps the most extreme examples of Lautreamont's surrealism in the entire set of poems. Stanza 2 is, in a certain sense, the strangest, for it is by far the least coherent. In Lautreamont's other surrealistic moments, the reader

generally can understand what is going on or what is being said. Here, however, Lautreamont seems to be simulating the disconnectedness of a dream, in which one idea flows readily into another and there is not any kind of over-arching structure which synthesizes all of the various, disparate parts. The purpose of this choice, however, is not at all clear. It is possible that Maldoror is simply trying to add to the atmosphere of the work as a whole; Stanza 2 does, indeed, provide a kind of feverish reverie which surely affects how the reader understands the other poems in the work.

Stanza 4 is also notable because it is one of the more bizarre images presented so far. Maldoror is depicted as an ancient, immobile body in which animals of various kinds have taken their refuge (once again, perhaps, indicating an amity with nature). He continues to exist only so that he can continue in his ideological battle with God. One thing this poem makes clear is that the poems are not meant to be a unified, coherent work, for elsewhere Maldoror is clearly not in this state. Lautreamont's interest is not in constructing a stable narrative but rather using Maldoror, a kind of anti-Christ character, in order to make his points about religion and humanity.

Book IV, Stanzas 5-8

Book IV, Stanzas 5-8 Summary

Stanza 5: The narrator addresses a man whom he accuses of stealing his eyes from a certain blonde woman. He supposes that the man did so because he wanted to appear beautiful even though he was not really. The man, the narrator says, also once imprisoned a man for twenty years. When the man finally escaped, he exacted his revenge by scalping his former captor. Though the narrator insists that the man is more evil than he is, he tries to tell his interlocutor some stories to establish the legitimacy of his own claim to evil. He says, for example, that he once watched a young girl drown in a lake. He even once imprisoned a man for five years and, like his interlocutor, was scalped by him out of revenge.

Stanza 6: The narrator recalls once falling into a deep sleep on a cliff and dreaming that he had become a hog. He was overjoyed at this transformation for he had finally escaped being part of the human race. When he woke up, he was naturally quite upset and, since that time, has tried to erase the memory of the dream.

Stanza 7: The narrator meets a man who has adapted to life in the sea. His hands and feet even have webbing that enable him to swim more efficiently. The man, it seems, is only visible to the narrator, however, for other people cannot see what he was looking at. He cries out to the strange man and the man swims to him, cautious to not get to close. The man explains that he was once a normal person with a family but, on account of the deceitful machinations of his jealous brother, was imprisoned in a dungeon and mistreated by his family for many years. When he finally escaped, he decided to throw himself into the sea but was pleased to discover that Providence had suited him for such a life and now provides him with everything he needs. The two say goodbye and part ways.

Stanza 8: Maldoror recalls a boy named Falmer. Falmer once found Maldoror trying to kill a woman and stopped him. Maldoror responded by throwing Falmer against a tree. When he threw him, he had his hand in his hear and thus was left with locks of blonde hair in has hand. He never found out whether Falmer lived or not, but the hair serves as a painful reminder of what happened.

Book IV, Stanzas 5-8 Analysis

Stanzas 6, 7, and 8 highlight a tension which the reader may have observed elsewhere in the book. Maldoror's attitude towards humanity seems inconsistent. He usually is very critical of it, almost as critical of people as he is of God (which would make sense if he does, in fact, believe that God is a human invention) yet there are times when Maldoror is strangely humane. This has already been seen in Book II, Stanza 14 when Maldoror surprisingly saves a man from drowning (the explanation for this seems to be rooted in

the fact that Maldoror already knew the man, or at least someone who looked like him). A touch of humanity is seen again in Stanza 8 here: Maldoror is in the middle of killing a woman when he Falmer, a young boy, tries to stop him. He throws Falmer against a tree and seems haunted by the possibility that he killed him, surely a strange guilt as he shows no remorse for what he was doing when Falmer stopped him. It would seem, though, that the two stanzas which precede Stanza 8 negate any possibility of Maldoror having any affection for another human being, for both are fantasies about leaving the human race. One possible explanation for Maldoror's seemingly contradictory words and behavior is that his sympathy for men only kicks in as a result of his homosexuality and pederasty (more explicitly elaborated upon Book V, Stanza 5)—both Holzer and Falmer are young boys.

Book V, Stanzas 1-4

Book V, Stanzas 1-4 Summary

Stanza 1: The narrator urges the reader to approach his poems with an open mind and, even if it is difficult to do so, accept the truths which are contained within them. He claims to be exploring areas of knowledge which previous thinkers have been too bashful to consider and, as such, he fears that his reader will be frightened off.

Stanza 2: The narrator watches as a beetle rolls balls of what appears to be dung to the foot of a mound, on top of which is a chimerical composition of a man and a pelican. Meanwhile, a vulture and an owl battle one another in the sky. When the beetle finally gets his ball to the mound, the man-pelican rebukes him and says that he has had enough revenge on the woman—apparently the beetle's balls are not made out of dung but used to be parts of a person. The beetle, in turn, rebukes the man-pelican for forgetting what this woman did to them. She betrayed them, romantically it seems, each in turn. The beetle returns to his work and when he is gone the man-pelican, with his mind now changed, reflects aloud that perhaps the woman does deserve to be abused in this way since she turned the two of them—brothers—into animals. The narrator, now with some notion of what is going on, though unsure whether he is dreaming or not, then cries out to the vulture and owl and urges them to stop fighting. He figures that they, too, must once have been human and imagines that they were the woman's lovers who once fought over her and continue that fight even still. The birds obey and each flies his own separate way.

Stanza 3: The narrator contemplates death, specifically voluntary death. Though he cannot laugh, he feels tempted to when he contemplates those who believe in the heroism of martyrs, those men and women who supposedly undergo painful deaths willingly for the sake of God. He considers the feelings of death and how, before one's death, one might regard it indifferently or even welcome it, but as the moment actually approaches, everyone will inevitably quiver and do whatever is possible to avoid it.

Stanza 4: The narrator addresses some kind of spirit—imagined here as a serpent—which is trying to deaden his soul. As he struggles against it, he realizes that it is an agent of the Creator: conscience. It is trying to make him act in accordance with God's commands and shun his immoral ways but he resists.

Book V, Stanzas 1-4 Analysis

Stanza 3 is a heavily psychological passage in this book. In it, Lautreamont uses certain assumptions about basic human instinct and fear to undermine those who believe that people might go to their deaths willingly and calmly. It is obvious that he is, once again, targeting religion here, specifically Catholicism, a religion which praises martyrdom as the greatest possible act of virtue and one which is centered around a man—Jesus

Christ—going to his death of his own free will. A critic might argue that Lautreamont's argument is not a particularly forceful one, for he does not ever give any good reason why the kind of heroics that many believe characterized the deaths of martyrs is not possible. At such a point, however, it is important to remember that Lautreamont is not writing a philosophical treatise and, therefore, is less interested with proving his points than presenting them in an aesthetically convincing way.

Book V, Stanzas 5-7

Book V, Stanzas 5-7 Summary

Stanza 5: Maldoror discloses that he is a pederast—that is, he is sexually attracted to young children—and describes the conditions of those with the same sexual interests and the nature of his own attraction. He notes that most pederasts are attracted to young girls; he, however, is more interested in young boys, for he finds that he has more in common with males than females. He claims to be intensely sexually attractive—to the point, indeed, that people come from all over the world just to taste his semen—but that he is only willing to open up his bed for a boy under fifteen years of age.

Stanza 6: The narrator muses on death in the context of a funeral procession for a dead young boy. He laments that he will never be able to fully understand death and, therefore, will also not be able to write adequately about it. Maldoror watches from afar as the priest gives a sermon by the side of the child's grave. He tries to reassure the gathered mourners that the child is in heaven and that they will be reunited with him after death. He says that the child, though seemingly dead, is really alive and, indeed, more alive than anyone on Earth. The priest then sees Maldoror in the distance and points him out to the assembly as an example of the opposite: a person who appears alive but is truly dead.

Stanza 7: Every night, a large spider which hides somewhere in his house crawls out, puts Maldoror under a spell which immobilizes him, and sucks some blood from the back of his neck. The occurrence is terrifying but Maldoror finds there is nothing he can do about it and hopes that it will soon come to an end, even if the end means that the spider will suck out the last of his blood and kill him. He lays down one night, prepared for the same terrible ordeal. As expected, the spider crawls out, places him under his paralyzing spell, and climbs on top of him. This time, though, two young men crawl out of the spider's breast, each carrying a flaming sword. They are two boys that Maldoror tried to kill in the past. The first is Reginald, whom Maldoror tried to kill when the two went swimming. Maldoror stabbed him after they dove off a large cliff and ignored all of his pleas for help. Reginald luckily was saved by a passing boat. The second is Elsseneur, a boy with whom Maldoror had an intimate, romantic relationship.

One day, though, after a long walk, Maldoror turned upon him and tried to stab him. During the struggle, a shepherd began to approach, causing Maldoror to try to hurriedly finish the job. He managed only to cut off Elsseneur's hand before escaping. Elsseneur, heartbroken and miserable, then tried to die by joining the army and getting into battles. He one day found himself pitted against a particularly formidable foe and the armies around them stopped to watch the fight. The duel resulted in a stalemate and, it turned out, Elsseneur's opponent was none other than Reginald. The two became good friends and were instructed by a heavenly angel that they should both transform into a single spider to torture Maldoror each night until they were commanded to stop. They did so for ten years and have come this night to finally tell Maldoror that his punishment is

over. The spider disappears and the spell is lifted. Maldoror gets up—he cannot go back to sleep—and hopes for something to console his miserable soul.

Book V, Stanzas 5-7 Analysis

Stanza 5 is clearly an example of a passage which is meant to shock the reader. While it would be wrong to read modern attitudes towards pedophilia and pederasty into a poem written in the 19th century, a time when large age differences in marriage were considered more acceptable, it is clear even from the rhetoric of the poem itself that the kind of sexual taste Maldoror is defending is not something accepted by society at large. His homosexuality, though, was probably more shocking to his readers than his interest in young boys, as homosexuality was an explicitly condemned sin by nearly every form of Christianity in existence. Maldoror's tolerance of different sexual preferences is rather surprisingly modern and well ahead of his time, though one might legitimately wonder how much this stanza reflects Lautreamont's own thoughts and how much of it is merely meant to scandalize those reading.

Stanza 7 is notable insofar as it is the first time which Maldoror seems to show any remorse for what he has done; significantly, this remorse comes as a result of Divine punishment. Taken out of context, and ignoring the surrealistic aspects which make this passage peculiarly his, one might take a rather traditional religious message from the poem: A would-be murderer is punished for his attempted crimes and, as a result, turns to repentance. As such a reading is completely inconsistent with the tone and explicit message of the rest of the story, though, the reader must search for a different interpretation. One possibility is that Lautreamont is trying to show how deeply revenge—a feeling which he might think is encouraged by Christianity—can affect an individual. It clearly has consumed both Reginald and Elssineur, whose lives for the past ten years have been dedicated to torturing him.

Book VI, Stanzas 1-5

Book VI, Stanzas 1-5 Summary

Stanza 1: The narrator informs the reader that the first five books, or songs, have only been building the foundation for the sixth and final song. In this song, he promises to bring his claims about man, God, and himself (Maldoror) to a fitting conclusion.

Stanza 2: The narrator explains the dilemma Maldoror finds himself in: His hatred of humanity makes him want to both escape humanity and live among men in order to kill or otherwise terrorize them. He reached the compromise of living in a remote, secluded area (like a cave) and traveling from time to time to some dense center of population in order to indulge his misanthropic desires. As time went on, this indulgence became increasingly difficult to carry out as he built himself a reputation; police forces were constantly on the look for him. He managed to avoid any dangers with ease, though, through his mastery of the art of disguise.

Stanza 3: A young boy named Mervyn is walking through streets to his home. Maldoror sees him and starts to follow him, but he is not sure what he wants to do about it. Mervyn, sensing some near danger but seeing nothing, hurries on his way. The narrator wonders why Mervyn does not just turn around and, therefore, know for certain if there is anything to be afraid of.

Stanza 4: Mervyn, from the previous stanza, returns home and collapses on the couch. His mother, overwhelmed with anxiety, tends to him but is sent away by his forceful father who wants to find out who did this to Mervyn. Only after drinking a tonic his mother keeps in her drawer does the boy have the energy to speak, but he is unable to provide any information about his assailant before drifting back into unconsciousness. Maldoror, meanwhile, lurks outside of the house and listens to everything. He is disappointed to hear that the family thinks that he intended to hurt the boy; his intentions, in reality, are much different. He sneaks away back into the night.

Stanza 5: Mervyn receives a letter from Maldoror. In it, Maldoror expresses his total devotion and promises to take Mervyn traveling around the world with him. He specifies a location for the two of them to meet in two days. Mervyn is immediately persuaded by the letter and its implications for his life dominate his thoughts for the rest of the day. His parents, worried by the strange, meditative state he has slipped into, try to rouse him by reading him stories, but their efforts are unsuccessful. He returns to his room and writes a letter thanking his mysterious benefactor and vowing to reciprocate the tremendous amount of good will already shown to him.

Book VI, Stanzas 1-5 Analysis

In the first stanza, Lautreamont builds up some rather high expectations for the work; he claims that it will consummate the themes he has already been building so far. It is

important, therefore, to keep this purpose in mind for the remainder of the work. Lautreamont's approach in these final pages, which are dominated by the story about Mervyn, is certainly markedly different from the rest of the story—it is the first time that there has been any meaningful continuity from one stanza to the next.

One fact about Mervyn that should immediately jump out at the reader is that he is a young boy, the object of Maldoror's sexual desires. Maldoror's pederasty seems to be the obvious explanation to his lament at the end of Stanza 4 that the family thinks that he is trying to cause Mervyn some harm. Whether such is actually his intention—or whether Lautreamont is misleading the reader—is yet to be seen.

Book VI, 6-10

Book VI, 6-10 Summary

Stanza 6: Maldoror reflects on his uncertain future, in which he fears he will reap the consequences of his continual moral decline. He looks forward only to the opportunity of committing more crimes, well aware that he only hastens his own downfall.

Stanza 7: Maldoror meets a madman on a bridge and talks to him. The madman is momentarily coherent—his madness seems to come and go in fits—and tells him the story about his father whom he blames for the death of his three sisters, the "three Daisies." His father, once a heavy drinker, had reformed his ways and became a very quiet, irritable man. He was particularly annoyed by a canary the family bought—he thought it was mocking him—and one day trampled the cage with the bird inside under his steel boots. The bird actually survived, but was mortally wounded. While the madman's mother tended to the bird, his sisters were becoming increasingly distraught and wound up hiding in the dog's kennel. After the bird was dead, the mother, led by the dog, found the three girls inside of the kennel, intertwined together, dead. They could retrieve the corpses only after the kennel was dismantled. In the aftermath, the father left, never to be seen again, and he—who was just a boy then—became the homeless beggar that he is today. Maldoror finds the story pleasing, if only because it confirms his dismal view of humanity.

Stanza 8: God sends an archangel to deal with Maldoror. The narrator mentions that God himself will come in the future and then repents of getting ahead of himself. The angel takes the form of a giant crab and meets Maldoror on the shore of a lake. It tells Maldoror that it has orders to prevent him from committing any more crimes and that it will carry out said orders using any force necessary. Maldoror pretends to repent of his crimes, causing the crab to rise out of the water as if to welcome him back in the Lord's flock. Maldoror then takes a stick and throws it at the crab, killing him instantly. He then transforms into a black swan and swims with a flock of white swans.

Stanza 9: Mervyn and Maldoror finally meet. Mervyn is so happy to see him that he cries, but Maldoror stuffs him into a sack and starts beating him. A man comes up to him and begs him to stop but Maldoror lies and says that inside the sack is a dog with mange that must be put down. Maldoror gives the sack to a butcher who is passing by who promises to finish the job of killing the "dog." He takes the sack to his three friends and, together, they pound on the sack with hammers and other blunt objects. One of them decides to make sure that it is actually a dog inside and they are shocked to discover Mervyn, brutally battered inside. Mervyn climbs out of the sack, runs home, and locks himself inside of his room.

Stanza 10: The heavenly forces reconvene in hopes of stopping Maldoror. The archangel, still in the form of a crab, hurries back to the spot where he was slain while God takes the form of a rhinoceros and goes to Earth, too. Meanwhile, Maldoror has

taken Mervyn again and has him suspended from a rope on top of a very high obelisk. After shooting the rhinoceros-God with his revolver—the shot does not kill him but does cause him to run away—he lets the rope go. Mervyn is crushed on the dome of a building. Years later, the legend of Mervyn's murder persists and schoolboys say a prayer whenever they pass by the building on which he was impaled.

Book VI, 6-10 Analysis

While certainly not a recommendation of religion or event morality, Stanza 6 might reasonably be read as a final, negative evaluation of Maldoror's immoral lifestyle. This should not be terribly surprising, despite the fact that Maldoror's behavior has often been cast in a positive light so far: It would be rather shocking of Lautreamont actually were in favor of the kind of barbaric and cruel crimes Maldoror has committed throughout the book. If it is correct to interpret much of his philosophy in terms of the dominant beliefs of the late-19th century, then Lautreamont should be equally indisposed to religion as to the chaotic violence of Maldoror. As the rest of the section bears out, the real literary purpose for Maldoror's crimes might be to show the inefficacy of religion in preventing them: Maldoror is able to send away first an angel and then God himself. Nothing can stop him from committing his murder and, in the end, he is successful. If one wants to stop such violence, one must not look to God, but rather, perhaps, to better political institutions or to a better educated and more enlightened populace.

Characters

Maldororappears in throughout

Maldoror is the main character of these poems. As the poems, at least until the sixth and final book, are not meant to form any kind of cohesive narrative, Maldoror's character and nature are not always consistent throughout. The most dramatic example of this inconsistency is Book IV, Stanza 4, in which Maldoror is presented as an ancient, immobile body in which various animals have nested; such a state is clearly not consistent with other passages, in which Maldoror is depicted as deftly sneaking around cities.

Maldoror's most significant quality, for Lautreamont's purposes, is that he has completely rejected God, religion, and morality. As such, he freely gives into his various sadistic and "perverse" instincts. He is an habitual murderer—he murders or tries to murder several people in various stories in the book and several other murders are referenced—and a homosexual with an interest particularly in young boys, a "vice" which would be particularly shocking to his 19th century audience. It is possible that Maldoror's homosexuality is the explanation for his rare moments of benevolence—for example

Maldoror's exact nature is unclear. Excluding those passages which make him into something particularly monstrous—such as the already-mentioned Book IV, Stanza 4—one still gets the impression that he is something supernatural. The term "vampire" is used to describe him at several points, though he denies being one since it implies that he is dead. Of course, what exactly the term "vampire" means in 19th century France might largely be lost on the modern reader but there is the obvious implication of some kind of supernatural evil.

Godappears in throughout

God's presence in the story is primarily in addresses by Maldoror or the narrator. God is constantly accused of various crimes and injustices, particularly for allowing (or directly causing) evil things to happen to undeserving people. This kind of complaint seems to be a literary adaptation of the problem of evil, one of the classic arguments against God's existence. According to this argument, God's existence is refuted by showing that the existence of evil things in the world—famines, plagues, or even evil people like Maldoror—contradicts some of his essential qualities, namely his goodness and his omnipotence.

While God is treated like an actual, existing being in the story, it is probably more reasonable to believe that Lautreamont is an atheist. The purpose of pretending that God's existence is rather obvious. Lautreamont is clearly interested in shocking his reader and a particularly effective way of doing so is through the use of blasphemy.

While atheism was far from a popular belief in 19th-century France, it was common enough among intellectuals that it likely would not scandalize Lautreamont's (probably considerably educated) audience. Blasphemy, though, was probably a line that had not been frequently transgressed by other authors and thus gave "Les Chants de Maldoror" an additional punch.

The Grave-Diggerappears in Book I, Stanza 12

Maldoror meets and converses with a grave-digger in Norway. Among the topics of their discussion is the finality of death and the existence of an afterlife.

The Female Sharkappears in Book II, Stanza 13

Maldoror goes searching for someone like him and finally finds his prize when he meets a large, female shark that is feasting on the corpses of men who died in a shipwreck.

The Fish-Manappears in Book IV, Stanza 7

Maldoror meets a man who tried to commit suicide by throwing himself into the sea but found that God had provided for him to live an amphibious existence.

Falmerappears in Book IV, Stanza 8

Falmer is a young boy who tries to stop Maldoror from killing a woman. Maldoror throws Falmer against a tree and runs away and is haunted by the possibility that the throw killed him.

Reginaldappears in Book V, Stanza 7

Maldoror once tried to murder Reginald and, in revenge, Reginald transforms into a spider with Elssineur to torment Maldoror for ten years.

Elssineurappears in Book V, Stanza 7

Elssineur was a young boy and possibly one of Maldoror's lovers. Maldoror tried to kill him but managed only to cut off his arm. Elssineur works with Reginald to torment Maldoror by turning into a spider every night.

Mervynappears in Book VI, Stanzas 3-10

Mervyn is a young boy who piques Maldoror's interest. Maldoror meets with him on the pretext of taking him away to travel, but instead kidnaps him and, ultimately, murders him.

The Crab-Archangelappears in Book VI, Stanzas 8 and 10

God sends one of his archangels, in the form of a large crab, to stop Maldoror. The archangel's failure to stop or even at all obstruct Maldoror shows the impotence of religion.

Objects/Places

Franceappears in throughout

Though few stories make explicit reference to their locations, there are several indications that Maldoror generally stays in France.

Conscienceappears in throughout

Lautreamont depicts conscience as a force God uses to torture men. It is discussed throughout the book, but the most explicit, and creative, scene is in Book II, Stanza 15, in which it is imagined as a flock flying, black octopi.

Prostitutionappears in Book I, Stanza 7

Maldoror makes a pact with Prostitution, a sign of his general repudiation of the moral law.

The Oceanappears in Book I, Stanza 9

Lautreamont contrasts the stability and peacefulness of the ocean with the chaotic nature of men.

Norwayappears in Book I, Stanza 12

Maldoror meets the grave-digger in Norway. The significance of the encounter taking place in Norway—aside from establishing Maldoror as an even more extreme outsider than he normally is—is not clear.

Mathematicsappears in Book II, Stanza 10

Lautreamont praises mathematics for its constancy and logicality, especially when juxtaposed with the inconstancy and irrationality of men.

The Cathedral Lampappears in Book II, Stanza 11

Maldoror attempts to convince a cathedral lamp to stop serving religion.

The Conventappears in Book III, Stanza 5

Maldoror visits a convent where he finds one of God's hair who witnessed God first commit fornication then torture and kill a boy.

The Two Baobobsappears in Book IV, Stanza 2

In an especially obscure and surreal stanza, the narrator sees before him two towers which, he claims, look like baobobs.

Falmer's Hairappears in Book IV, Stanza 8

A fourteen year-old-boy named Falmer tries to physically stop Maldoror from murdering a woman. Maldoror, in response, hurls Falmer against a tree by his hair, pulling out a handful in the process. He runs away, fearing that he may have killed the boy. The hair is a tangible reminder of his unusually guilty conscience.

Themes

The Injustice of God

The main theme of the book is the injustice of God. It is important that the reader realize, however, that this injustice is, in all likelihood, metaphorical. It is doubtful that Lautreamont actually believes in God. Rather, he is probably providing a poetic adaptation of one of the classical arguments against the existence of God: the so-called problem of evil. According to this objection, God, who is defined as supremely good and supremely powerful, cannot exist because, if he did, he would stop all the suffering in the world. This objection is personified by Maldoror himself, a man who God does not stop from victimizing humanity again and again, generally without consequence (though he is punished a few times, as in Book V, Stanza 7). God's impotence, then, is not literal—it is not as if Lautreamont believes that there is God who is literally too weak to stop Maldoror or who could be so easily turned back as the rhinoceros in Book VI). Rather, God's weakness is symbolic of the fact that God, in reality, does not do anything to stop all of the horrible things in the world, both those things that happen naturally, like plagues, and those things which humans do to one another, like murder.

Why Lautreamont chooses to present his atheism in this way should be fairly obvious. In 19th-century France, though Christianity was still by far the dominant religion of the common person, atheism or similar belief-systems had for years been common among intellectuals. Lautreamont is obviously interested in shocking his audience and, in such a climate, simply denying God's existence would no longer do. Blasphemy, though, was a tactic used seldom or perhaps never, and therefore could provoke a particular kind of horror and outrage in his readers.

The Depravity of Mankind

Secondary to Maldoror's hatred of God is his hatred of mankind. This hatred stems primarily from the wicked ways in which people generally treat one another. Such hatred is surely ironic in some ways—Maldoror, after all, is the most heinous criminal of all—but Maldoror justifies it by saying that he at least is open with his evil. Other people try to mask their crimes in the language or justice or morality while Maldoror boldly denies the existence, or at least the efficacy, of any such thing.

One purpose for focusing on mankind's depravity is related to the central point of the book, namely, that God unjustly allows horrible things to happen to people. Simply put, other people are frequently enough the cause of these horrible things and, since God, who easily could stop them, does not, Maldoror despises him for it.

That said, Maldoror's misanthropy has a substance of its own, too. Part of his attack on religion is also an attack on morality and, in some ways, his amoralism can be seen as a precursor to the more rigorous, philosophical attacks on morality seen later in the

century, particularly by such philosophers as Friedrich Nietzsche. Lautreamont's universe is one in which one can do whatever one pleases; there is no restraint on the will whatsoever. If one chooses to be merciful, it is only because there is something to be gained from doing so. Thus, Maldoror only shows any kind of respect for young boys, the objects of his sexual desire as outlined in graphic detail in Book V, Stanza 5. (Of course, he also tortures or kills boys, too, showing just how unprincipled Maldoror's actions are.)

Surrealism and the Grotesque

Les Chants de Maldoror are notable from an historical perspective because they are seen as a precursor to many later works of surrealist literature. It is important to understand just how unconventional this work is; Lautreamont did not have the precedent of someone like Kafka on which to base his work. He was, in large part, breaking new ground.

Whenever one approaches a work with such fantastic and sometimes disturbing imagery, one must ask what the purpose is—if there is a purpose. While in many cases it would be natural to interpret a surrealistic work symbolically, such a hermeneutic is usually misplaced here. It is difficult, for example, to assign a great deal of significance to the imagery in Book II, Stanza 15. In that stanza, Lautreamont depicts conscience as a flock of flying, black octopi. Such images are surely creative and imaginative, but they are not rich symbols. In many cases, like this one, it is probably sufficient to conclude that Lautreamont is simply exercising his imagination.

In other cases, the purpose of the imagery is to shock the reader. Take, for example, the image of Maldoror licking an angel's face with his blistered, diseased tongue in Book II, Stanza 11. Even to the modern reader—whose sensibilities are much more hardened than the 19th century reader—the image is likely to evoke disgust. It is important to note that this imagery is not wholly gratuitous, for shocking and even disgusting the reader is one of Lautreamont's chief rhetorical strategies. The purpose of such a strategy is primarily to denigrate certain religious or moral sentiments—it is no coincidence that it is an angel whom Maldoror licks. This is especially true of the way children are presented in the text. They rarely appear in circumstances with which the reader would be comfortable. Book I, Stanza 6 describes torturing and deceiving a child; Book II, Stanza 5 contains a graphic disembowelment of an eleven-year-old girl; Maldoror rapes a young girl in Book III, Stanza 2; and, of course, he kills the young Mervyn in the narrative which spans most of Book VI. His use of children is intended to strike at the very root of morality since hardly anyone would disagree that it is wrong to hurt a child. Therefore, by undermining the readers' moral regard for children, he hopes to undermine his reader's morality altogether.

Style

Point of View

The book alternates between the first-person perspective of Maldoror and a third-person narrator. This alternation sometimes occurs in the middle of a stanza, without any kind of notice or explanation. In several poems, it is completely ambiguous whether the narrator is Maldoror or not. This choice has the effect, surely intentional, of blurring the boundary between Lautreamont's beliefs and Maldoror's beliefs. Though it is difficult to believe that Lautreamont really approves of murder, rape, and torture, he is surely in agreement, in principle, with Maldoror's amoralism and, for that reason, gives a kind of tacit approval to Maldoror's misanthropic lifestyle.

Most stanzas in the six books are narratives, describing some action Maldoror is doing or something the narrator witnessed or was told. There are many exceptions to this generalization, however. The work includes two odes, for example, one to the ocean (Book I, Stanza 9) and one mathematics (Book II, Stanza 10). Others are more reflective and even essay-like, such as Maldoror's description and partial defense of his pederasty in Book V, Stanza 5.

Setting

While an explicit setting is only given rarely, one must assume, unless otherwise indicated, that the action is taking place somewhere in France. Lautreamont's ambiguity about location is connected with his surrealistic style. He is not attempting to create a concrete, detailed world because he is not trying to describe the world in any direct way. Rather, the poems are about the world as a whole and humanity in general and, therefore, it is necessary for the reader to be able to easily imagine any given scene happening in a setting with which he is familiar. If Lautreamont had firmly grounded the stories in some particular setting, the reader might easily misunderstand him as writing just about France; Lautreamont's ambitions extend far beyond his nation's borders, of course, even if his intended audience was primarily France. He is attempting to undermine theism and morality in general, two things which are found in almost any human society.

Indeed, it is actually quite notable that Lautreamont does not seem to particularly target Christianity, by far the dominant form of theism in France and the Western world in the late-19th century. He does frequently involve angels in his stories, but many religions have the notion of angels or at least something analogous. In Book II, Stanza 11, Maldoror enters a cathedral, but his subsequent fight with angels—symbolizing the inefficacy of God and, therefore, of religion—might equally apply to any religion. Lautreamont has amazingly broad vision, then, and is able to rise above his own cultural circumstances and write a book which is largely applicable to the life of anyone,

regardless of culture. It is no surprise, then, that he would place so little emphasis on where exactly his stories his happen.

Language and Meaning

One of the most obvious features of Lautreamont's literary style is his use of creative, vivid, and sometimes quite disturbing imagery. His style is especially noteworthy when one considers that the surrealist genre of literature was not really in existence in 19th-century France. Franz Kafka, the genre's most celebrated and well-known writer, came several decades after "Les Chants de Maldoror" was published.

The intentionally shocking nature of "Les Chants de Maldoror" also really does not have much of a precedent, though it is perhaps worth speculating that he drew some inspiration from the work of the Marquis de Sade. Lautreamont's graphic imagery, sometimes quite revolting, really do not have a parallel until well into the 20th century, with the development of post-modernist literature and the genre of so-called "abject" literature. The purpose of being revolting is because Lautreamont hopes to jolt his reader's attitudes towards certain beliefs, particularly belief in God and belief in the existence of objective morality. His rhetorical strategy seems to be premised on the plausible notion that one can more easily unseat long-held beliefs if one takes the reader out of a comfort zone in which those ideas seem to, so to speak, be at home. The world of Maldoror is not something the reader is likely to have ever seen and, therefore, it makes it easy for him to question his assumptions about his own world.

Structure

"Les Chants de Maldoror" is divided into six books or songs. Each book is, in turn, divided into several stanzas. Though the character of Maldoror is pervasive throughout the entire work, with the exception of the sixth and final book, there is no substantive continuity from one stanza to the next and certainly no continuity from one book to the next. Indeed, the stanzas frequently contradict one another. The most extreme example is in Book IV, Stanza 4, in which Maldoror is presented as an ancient, immobile body in which animals of various kinds have nested. Given that Maldoror is quite mobile, even agile, in other parts of the collection, this stanza—and several others, though not so blatantly—make it clear that Lautreamont is not interested in providing any kind of over-arching, consistent narrative. As mention, the sole exception to this is Book VI, in which Lautreamont provides a story basically over the entire book, encompassing stanzas two through ten.

The content of each stanza in the book is highly variable. Many are narratives, told either from the perspective of Maldoror or the anonymous narrator, but there are many other types of poems included, too. There are odes—for example, Lautreamont's ode to mathematics in Book II, Stanza 10—and even serious, reflections by Maldoror about some aspect of himself, like his pederasty in Book V, Stanza 5. Despite this great variety, there is a general, though not universally followed, pattern to each of the books.

The first one or two stanzas usually outlines what the book is going to be about or what Lautreamont hopes to accomplish in it. Most books also end with a kind of conclusion which may or may include a promise of what will come in later books.

Quotes

". . . unless he [the reader] brings to his reading a rigorous logic and a tautness of mind equal at least to his wariness, the deadly emanation of this book will dissolve his soul as water does sugar." (29)

"Like those dogs, I feel the need for the infinite. I cannot, cannot satisfy this need. I am the son of a man and a woman, from what I have been told. This astonishes me . . . I believed I was something more. Besides, what does it matter to me where I come from? If I had any choice, I would rather have been born the male of a female shark, whose hunger welcomes tempests and of the tiger, whose cruelty is well-known." (40)

"You will not, in my last hour, find me surrounded by priests. I want to die lulled by the waves of the stormy sea, or standing on a mountain top . . . my eyes looking upwards, no: I know my extinction will be complete. Besides, I have no hope of mercy." (48)

"How much longer will you keep up the worm-eaten cult of this god, who is insensible to your prayers and to the generous sacrifices that you offer him as an expiatory holocaust?" (89)

"The atoms of clay may just as well be dispersed in this way as any other." (119)

"Then the cocks and the hens rushed up in a crowd from all parts of the yard, attracted by the smell of semen, forced her on to the ground despite her vigorous resistance, swarmed all over her body as if it were a dung-heap and tore at the flaccid lips of her swollen vagina with their beaks until the blood came out. The hens and the cocks, sated, went back to scratch around in the grass of the yard; the woman, now clean, got up, trembling and covered in wounds, as when one awakes after a nightmare." (137)

"I cannot help laughing, you will reply; I accept this absurd explanation, but then let it be a melancholy laugh. Laugh, but cry at the same time. If you cannot cry with your eyes, cry with your mouth. If even that is impossible, urinate; but I warn you that some kind of liquid is necessary here, to counteract the dryness that laughter, with its creased features, bears in its womb." (152)

"Thus Providence made clear to me, in a not inexplicable way, that she did not want my sublime projects to be realized even in a dream." (168)

"'And who are you, audacious substance? No! . . . no! . . . I am not mistaken; and despite the multiple metamorphoses you have recourse to, your snake's head will always gleam before my eyes like a lighthouse of eternal injustice and cruel domination! He [God] wanted to take the reins of command, but he cannot reign! He wanted to become an abomination to all the brings of creation, and in this he succeeded. He wanted to prove that he alone is the monarch of the universe, and there it is that he is mistaken. . . .'" (192)

"A long time before this the spider's abdomen had opened up and from it two youths in blue robes had sprung out, each with a flaming sword in his hand, and they had gone to take up their position at the side of the bed, as if from that moment on to guard the sanctuary of sleep." (205)

"Our hero perceived that by frequenting caves and taking refuge in inaccessible places, he was transgressing the laws of logic by arguing in a vicious circle. For if, on the one hand, he was indulging his loathing of mankind by the compensation of solitude and remoteness and was passively circumscribing his limited horizon amid the stunted bushes, brambles and wild vines, on the other hand his activity no longer found sustenance to feed the minotaur of his perverse instincts." (214)

"The listener inwardly approves of this new example which bears out his disgusting theories. As if, because of one man whose crime was committed under the influence of wine, one had the right to accuse the whole of mankind!" (233)

"In order to construct mechanically the brain of a somniferous story, it is not enough to dissect the reader's understanding with all kinds of folly and brutalize it completely with renewed doses, so as to paralyze his faculties for the rest of his life, by the infallible law of fatigue; one must, apart from this, by means of a good mesmerizing fluid, ingeniously reduce him to a somnambulic state in which it is impossible for him to move, forcing him to close his eyes against his inclination by the fixity of your own." (240)

Topics for Discussion

What is the purpose of Lautreamont's grotesque and disgusting imagery?

Describe the significance of Lautreamont's writing style making reference to his social and historical context.

Does Lautreamont believe that God exists?

What is Lautreamont's attitude towards Maldoror's action? Why is Maldoror, a murderer and rapist, presented as a kind of hero?

What is the significance of Maldoror's pederasty and how does it affect his actions?

What is Maldoror's main grievance with God?

How does Maldoror's hatred of humanity tie in with his hatred of God?