Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties, Translations and Considerations of Rainer Maria Rilke Study Guide

Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties, Translations and Considerations of Rainer Maria Rilke by Rainer Maria Rilke

BOOKRAGS

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Prologue and Letters on Love

Prologue and Letters on Love Summary

John J. L. Mood opens his book with a prologue describing the profound effect Ranier Maria Rilke's writing had on him, and his resulting desire to spread the appreciation of Rilke's work to the world. He describes the difficulty of speaking to so profound an appreciation, but recounts finally beginning the task with the exhaustive translation of his poems from German to English and the compilation of excerpts from his essays, as presented in this book. He dedicates it to Rilke-lovers, categorizing him with James Joyce as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, and hoping to inspire appreciation among newcomers for the beauty of his work.

In his introduction, he describes the process of compiling essays on the topic of love and how, in his early reading of Rilke in the 1960s, he had discovered the depth and comprehensive lucidity of Rilke's feminism and views on love and the conventions thereof. He describes the influences of Rilke's friendships with feminists Ellen Kay and Lou Andreas-Salome, and describes Rilke's sensual and soulful writing about sex to be a poetic and spiritual act.

In describing the genius of Rilke's voice, he cites Suzanne Lilar, who described a generation who passed in the '60s from Puritanism to promiscuity without ever having experienced genuine, deep sensual love, saying that this group is the one so badly in need of Rilke's wisdom. He includes an excerpt from Rilke in which he describes Eros as seen by Socrates, restless and frustrated between desire and consummate love, and concludes his introduction with questions about how modern humans learn to love with no adequate teachers. Mood's gathered essays are Rilke's written contemplation of that question - of how one may learn in Eros the lessons it has to teach about true and perfect love.

The first of Rilke's essays posits the importance of living comfortably in the quest for answers to the questions about love. He implores the reader always to be a beginner, always learning and asking, and loving the searching journey for its own sake. Second, Mood includes an essay pondering the tragedy that the act of sex is the one the Christian church has focused on sullying and making forbidden, even while it is this pure and ecstatic act from which all humanity comes forth. Rilke wonders that they can assert the idea of sex as a filthy act so widely with so little evidence that the act is, in point of fact, evil. He asserts that instead, it is the point at which humanity ought most securely to belong to God, and find and express beauty and identity there. Concluding that excerpt, Rilke points out that children are the only ones with the full pleasure of innocence not because they haven't had sex, but because they haven't learned to scorn the part of their bodies that most fully experiences joy.

The next short excerpt makes the point that friendship exists to protect solitude as the place where one's true identity is fostered, and that it is the only thing that breaks up the

long periods of isolation that come from living in the throngs of the crowd. In the essay that follows, he draws that idea into the institution of marriage, in which each member is set up as guardian of the other member's solitude. Only when the two individuals are allowed to remain whole and independent, separated by distances left uncrossed, can their togetherness be a benefit to them both as means for their self-realization.

He drives the point still deeper in the next excerpt, in which he says that companionship ought always to be the strengthening of two neighboring solitudes in which each person remains wholly themselves, giving nothing up for the union. He counteracts the common belief that anyone can successfully take part in a marriage with the observation that young people can't keep themselves intact when they love, but throw themselves in pieces at love, and then resent it for not working well. His analogy is of flowers being given without being arranged. Then, once the relationship is changed by the dissolution of its individual members, they try to fix it with ultimatums, not allowing their union to be a living, changing thing. Young people, he concludes, cannot love as whole contributors, but can only determine to learn how to remain whole and rich enough to sustain love by committing to the process of self-cultivation with patience and peaceful composure.

The next excerpt deals with the phenomenon of young, haphazard love and the conventions invented to establish rules and protections for it, so badly has it been done over and over again. He comments early in his dissertation that love is not an invitation to give over oneself, but a call to make oneself the best and most complete expression it is in an individual to be. When it is a dissolution instead, inciting people to throw their broken and incomplete selves at a relationship, the only possible outcome is disillusionment and disgust. So exist for these moments those social conventions that reinforce the idea that love should be pleasure and so remove all responsibility to work at this demanding task. The best people can do, and must, according to Rilke, is to give themselves to the apprenticeship and work of loving, so that posterity has some standard higher than unhappy marriages and cheap and meaningless sexual relationships to emulate and build on for their own posterities.

The essay that follows observes sex to be but one of the difficult things with which individuals have been charged, and implores individuals to achieve a relation to sex uniquely their own, untainted or informed by institutions. He compares what has happened to the instinct of sex to that of hunger, which men have dulled with greed and over-indulgence, until the purity of the instinct as a guiding force is all but obliterated. He urges people to remind themselves of the serious business it is to be a part of procreation, and the communion there is in that act with every other living thing. His vision is for man and woman to come together as brother and sister, inspired by their communion with nature, dedicated to the task of inspiring the poets who will come after them, and fully dedicated to the task of teaching and inspiring the lives they create.

The next essay opens with a comparison between art and sex, in which Rilke suggests that the creative process is full of the same desire and ecstasy as the sexual act, but where that creative impulse finds a soul that is too male, it will be stymied by the overabundance of heat without tenderness with which the male sex has polluted love. In the essay that follows, Rilke describes the female sex as on the verge of breaking

through its societal boundaries. He postulates that at first, women will break from their roles to imitate the roles of men and then, having been cleansed by the experience, their whole and perfect femininity will be revealed, and love will be redefined as from human being to human being instead of merely from man to woman. His final excerpt places humanity outside of the province of guilt, subject instead to a sexual god due at any moment to invade and instruct humanity.

Prologue and Letters on Love Analysis

Rilke's writing comes from a place far ahead of his time at the close of the 19th century, and proposes a mutual autonomy in love relationships that few had conceived of and that certainly had not come to be a part of main-stream thought at that point in history. His vision of two complete individuals meeting on their own paths to self-realization and protecting each other's quests as something sacred and not to be sacrificed to a union is a completely unique proposition. Indeed, the ideal for relationships was for lovers, even friends, to forsake all else, women in particular leaving whatever individuality they had behind, in service to the union.

Young lovers, in particular, have something to learn from Rilke's observation that they traditionally throw themselves with such violent abandon into new love that they reserve nothing of themselves to remind themselves of their own paths or to ensure that they retain a source of something to offer a relationship. Their own growth is stunted, abandoned at the point of their meeting, in order that they can focus all of their creative energy on something that will crumble under its own weight if the two individuals do not remain in tact.

His perspective on sex is also quite distinctive in his era, as he views it as a communal act with nature, an act of worship and the joining together of two equals. The fact that he describes it as among the most difficult and significant tasks with which humanity has been charged attests to the fact that he has devoted a great deal of thought to its emotional and cosmic significance. His plea that lovers dedicate themselves to the task of loving well in order to teach and inspire the generations that follow them is both inspirational and tragic, since sex today is still both condemned in some circles and abused in others, but more rarely found as a healthy and equitable expression as a part of lasting relationships.

The last of Rilke's essays reveal his high view of the female sex, and her ability and destiny to break free of the restrictions that bound her in his lifetime. The most beautiful part of that prediction is the idea that when women are loosed from their bonds, the love relationship will finally realize its full potential, and become an equitable exchange between two human beings.

Poems on Love

Poems on Love Summary

Mood introduces the section dedicated to Rilke's poems on love by talking about how deeply sensual Rilke's symbolism is. Even when he is describing spiritual things, sensuality is the language he speaks. He observes that comment about his sensuality is missing from many assessments of Rilke, and so Mood chooses his poems based on their ability to redress that balance, and demonstrate the intense sexuality of Rilke's poetry. He also describes the balance Rilke strikes between the masculine and feminine tone, using both passion and gentleness in his voice. Rilke so masterfully communicates this beautiful and balanced view of love that Mood is surprised that the poet had not been more successful in his own love relationships. He wanted, as in every subject, for art and life to connect, and to transform one another. Mood concludes by prefacing the poems with the observation that they are both sensual and tough-minded, having been written when Rilke was in his forties.

The Seven Phallic Poems are exactly as overtly sexual as Mood had said they would be, describing the act of copulation just at the moment of the man's climax. He describes moments of pleasure as magical and intimate things, and uses natural imagery, like calling the inside of a woman a tree into which she draws his seed. He also compares her womb to the heavens, himself filling it with stars, and links the moment of orgasm with the cosmos, calling her womb a crystal ball.

In his third Phallic Poem, Rilke shifts his imagery to that of a god, a Herman pillar after which his body is named, and in whose lands, he and his lover are provinces. At the conclusion of his poem, he describes their consummation as the freeing of the god and his hounds from the ravaged column. He maintains the imagery of the column through the forth poem, in which he describes her womb as a secret room into which he is allowed entry, in which she coaxes him to the summit, and where he will fill her dark night with a dazzling rocket. In the fifth, his imagery changes to a tree ecstatically standing in a chamber before it declines. Death appears as a metaphor for sex in the sixth Phallic Poem, in which she is heaven resurrecting his stiff corpse. Also, in the seventh, his metaphor is of a child climbing a peak of pleasure.

Rilke's next set of poems is a collection of poems on love as a general theme. The first, "Greek Love Talk," is as sensual as the last set, but focused on a young lover's desire to touch her breasts with her lover, as they are still a new fascination for her. In "The Lovers," the two are described to be swirling around each other and turning to spirit as their blood becomes inflamed, their senses heightened and focused solely on each other. He asks how well one remembers love in the third poem, and testifies that the night holds him like a lover in the forth. In the third poem from the summer of 1909, he theorizes that the night is made of all the open spaces left in arms that have lost lovers, and encourages the reader to live until exhausted, like a flower. In the sixth poem, he speaks of the fragrance of his lover, and his desire to please her enough to change her

look of expectation to pleasure, a sentiment echoed in the poem that follows, in which he wishes to lend reality and substance to rapture.

The poem entitled "Woman's Lament I" imagines a woman missing her lost lover, wishing to be touched as she stands under trees. In the second Woman's Lament, she lies awake moaning while the garden grows outside, bothered not by her solitude. The single line that follows theorizes about the words the penis might speak. In the poem written at the end of 1923, Rilke compares the maturing female form to the evolution of her hairstyle as she grows older. Pigtails change to braids, then to curls, as pinafores stretch to accommodate her new shape. In the second-to-last poem in the section, Rilke describes the quenching experience just sitting in a stream of cool water is to him, and compares that satisfaction that comes without drinking to the pleasure and satisfaction he would take from simply touching the shoulders or the breasts of his lover. The closing poem asks his lover if she feels the same pleasure at the thought of him that he feels at the thought of her, using the imagery of a tree and a chalice.

Poems on Love Analysis

Mood's admiration for Rilke continues to be a shaping theme as he introduces this first group of poems. He wants to shatter the suppositions about Rilke that he is over-emotional or sentimental by pointing out that he did his writing on love after he had lived through several years of loving and reading, making himself a student to it, as his essays suggested in the opening chapter. He also goes out of his way to point out that the more feminine tone of his poems was balanced by an equally masculine passion.

Examples of the masculine voice are easy to find in the Seven Phallic Poems, as the lover speaks tenderly to his lover, as if her womb is a temple, or a beautiful spot in the woods into which he is invited to spend time. He, as if he is approaching a holy place, talks about his part as if he were there to offer gifts, and to be lost in the beauty of the place. There is also a literary timelessness and universality in his using imagery from nature and the ancient Greeks, allowing his poetry to retain its relevance across barriers of time, sex and culture.

Death is a theme interwoven throughout in a curious way, but very distinctive of Rilke's work, according to Mood. He talks about his erect masculinity as a stiff corpse being taken into a temple and resurrected, allowing death to remain a beautiful, even vibrant part of life, without any sense of morbidity or dread associated with it at all. She is the object of his eternal worship, in life and in death alike.

The more feminine aspect of his voice and his understanding is easily seen in "Greek Love Talk" and "The Lovers," in which his imagery is delicate and fluid, and the expressions are tender and focused on his enjoyment of the pleasure of the woman. In the poem in which the night holds him like a lover, he is speaking with a seemingly completely feminine voice, but expressing an idea and sensation that crosses gender lines. The "Woman's Lament" poems are both strongly feminine, but their symbolism, of a being abandoned and missing something lost while the rest of the world goes on

unperturbed allows people of every sex to find themselves in them. The closing poem unites the sexes again, both in its overt subject matter and in his addressing his lover as a woman and sharer of the experience of yearning.

Poems on Other Difficulties

Poems on Other Difficulties Summary

In Mood's introduction, he surveys Rilke's career and evolution as a writer, pointing out his major influences like Nietzche, Lou Andreas-Salome and Auguste Rodin, and discussing the impressive collection of writing that came out of his "great giving" in February of 1922. It was then that he finished the "Duino Elegies" and the "Sonnets to Orpheus." Critics are, Mood points out, divided over which is better, but he directs his focus to the works that came after those landmark works, and it is that collection from which he chooses his next selections. These poems all deal with the perennial themes of growth, life, death and transformation and thereby retain their relevance despite passing years and evolving culture.

In the first poem, "The Poet Speaks of Praising," Rilke contrasts questions of angst with fearful days, gray monotony, disingenuous people and the need to maintain a point of reference in the turbulence of life with the attestation that the way to endure it all is to praise. In "The Poet Praises," Rilke speaks to young girls and admonishes them to dance the taste of the orange, its warm landscape, the glow of home, and further draws the metaphor to symbolize their waiting wombs. In "The Poems Praise," Mood gathers a collection of poems, the first of which philosophizes on the topic of life and death, surmising that a man who understands the purpose of his life will celebrate in life and go exuberantly toward death. Life and death are juxtaposed in the next two poems; the first talking about death as a progression into the stars and eternity, and the second describing life as a hymn of the earth, a dance, or the march of life through a vine.

The planet Venus is the subject of the first poem from January, 1924, and in it Rilke praises the early evening vibrancy of its glow in the evening sky, and the strength with which it shines independent of the dark on which the other stars depend. The second poem from the same period theorizes on the subject of silence: Rilke posits that one who is silent comes closest to the roots of speech, and is the most able to receive the wisdom that is made available in silence. The next poem asks the subject to invite growth with the metaphor of a rose.

The second poem from February, 1924 centers on the gods as its subject matter. Rilke supposes that they walk through the heavens sending winds to guide the thoughts of men, and even when the men don't obey them fully, the communication is the means by which they lend places their holiness. He makes a similar statement about life in the very next poem, pointing out that we may not know why things captivate us, only that it is through our being captivated that life teaches us what it is.

The final two poems before the subject changes to Magic describe the transition of water between their frozen place in the mountains to the life-bringing journey through the rivers and streams in the spring. He calls their journey song, and in the next poem, calls everything play.

In the poem titled "Magic," Rilke contemplates the mysteries of fire in nature and in art, when one destroys, and the other is a deliberate celebration of beauty fire. Magic, however, contrasted with art, is in the beauty of the words beginning to sound like the sounds of nature. In the next poem, Rilke goes further into the theme of magic with invitation, inviting his reader to make beauty and destiny out of the commonplace, calling out wishes boldly. In the poem that follows, he invites the reader to receive willingly and contemplatively the gifts night has to offer, and when he has, night will know him, too. Mood closes the section with the single-line observation of quinces.

In "From the Cycle: Nights", Rilke speaks to night like a lover, beautiful and dark, huge, and full of constellations and distances, and says even as vast and naked the night is, he dares to be in it in communion with the earth. "Force of Gravity" contemplates the solitude of the force, but also talks about it like a force united with, and lending satisfaction and ease to, everything on which it has its effect. "Mausoleum" centers on plant imagery, describing the shattering of a silence when one shifts his position, sitting in a scene dominated by plants and their silence, contemplating the wind and the song it sings until the poet turns them to verse. The next stanza, also dated October, 1924, describes how even in meeting, he feels the coming of the inevitable parting, as if the moment of meeting had been sprinkled with the pollen of the flower of parting.

The next October, 1924 poem focuses on the subject of the earth itself as home, and the theme continues in the poem that follows, in which Rilke asks the earth for pure clay to make a jar of for his tears. He observes that his essence is lost without something with which to commune, and that everything, including his tears, is most itself when it has somewhere to belong.

The first poem from 1925 contemplates innerness as parallel to the expanse of sky filled with stars and birds, and wind leading him back home. In the second poem from July of the same summer, he refers similarly to the voices that guide him. The final 1925 poem, this one from October of that year, recounts a conversation Rilke has imploring the gods to lend their powers of regeneration and creation to the world. He describes their waking in spring, and asks that they give the same waking energy again in the places where men have failed.

The poem entitled "Gong" uses the imagery of gods dissolved in liquid, stars reformed to become sounds and storms raging in supporting columns to describe the sound and inspiration in the sound of a clanging gong. He also describes the gong's co-incident beginning and ending, celebration and tumult, time and eternity. The poem that follows is an invitation to a union very like marriage, in that it is a defining role, hand in hand equated to wine being in a wine glass.

"Music" describes music as the most wakeful form of expression and living. The expanses of the universe are enveloped in music, and it is the eternal and infinite expression and the source of our awakening understanding, immune from responsibility to explain its existence.

The next two poems in line, both very short, deal with the idea of the world being blind, and the people in it recipients of whatever life would throw their way. He wishes in the next poem for the reader to continue not to belong, as if it is a blessing for the reader's good.

Closing the chapter, Mood includes a poem Rilke wrote less than two weeks before his death in December of 1926, in which Rilke contemplates the pain in his body, and the passion he has sought to put on the page. He recognizes the nearing end, wonders at the fact that so few people have really known him. This is an illness like he has never experiences, and he warns not to let this new temptation to renounce mix with the things that had captivated him in his youth.

Poems on Other Difficulties Analysis

The poem entitled, "The Poet Speaks of Praising" is an appeal to optimism amid the parts of life that most frequently make it seem impossible, and is an excellent example of the kind of wisdom that is best passed on after a good deal of life experience has made its deliverer a credible speaker on the subject. It is valuable that Mood has already pointed out at this point in the book Rilke's dedication to learning and growing throughout his life. The following poem, in which the poet praises, is then also seasoned with the wisdom that makes one a connoisseur of the things he wishes the girls to celebrate instead of merely an enthusiast.

The theme of death sweetening and deepening life appears in this chapter, as well, as he glorifies death as the one thing that can give perspective and significance to life when rightly understood, and is itself the crowning glory of life, finally allowing the liver passage into the communion with the eternal and mysterious. Communion with nature is also a powerful theme in this chapter, as plants symbolize living people rooted to the earth, drawing their life from it, and as they find their inspiration from the glow of Venus and the constellations in the heavens. Rilke also continuously calling his readers to communion with the cosmic and the possible, allowing for magic, the inspiration of the gods coming to humanity on the winds, and night coming on the earth and its inhabitants bearing gifts, and embracing him like a lover.

Emotion and spirituality are also presented quite powerfully in this selection of poems. His communion with earth sounds like a child's with his mother when he asks for clay to make a vessel for his tears, thereby legitimizing his and their place in the world. His introspection leads from exploration of his own emotion to their significance on a cosmic scale as he begins to contemplate the forces that guide humanity during its sojourn among nature. He asks for inspiration and regeneration from the gods, echoing in different words his desire always to be growing, learning, and thereby being continuously recreated. Deities are the uncaused first cause, celebrated and memorialized in the gong of his bell, and men are blind and stumbling without the guidance of heaven. His wish that people not belong to this earthly life, but to remember the passageway to the life beyond, learning from but not attaching oneself to the physical life is repeated in different words again and again.

Blood-Remembering

Blood-Remembering Summary

Mood prefaces the excerpt from Rilke entitled "Blood-Remembering" by explaining the frequency with which Rilke talked about the difficulty of writing verse, and his emphasis on the idea that one had to do a lot of living before one would even have any quality verse to offer. He points out Rilke's having mentioned the fact both in his poems on love and in his novel, "The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge" in which the main character speaks with Rilke's voice.

In the essay itself, Rilke opens by putting forth the idea that verse can't amount to anything before their writer has lived a long and full life. Before he has, it is more likely that they will be full of feelings only, when experiences are what make quality poetry. He says one must come to know the smallest nuances of life, its sounds and places, the faces and truth behind the faces of people in a hundred different circumstances common to the experience of man. In short, he must live through a variety of epic experiences, contemplate them, forget them, and then have the patience to wait for the memory of them to return on their own before they can become quality lines of verse. He calls that blood-remembering, when the experiences of one's life have become so much a part of a person's make-up that they have become cellular wisdom, and it is from that point that one might have some quality verse to offer the world.

Blood-Remembering Analysis

This is a section written from a place of deep and long contemplation in which Rilke is imagining not only where good writing comes from, but also the origins of character and wisdom themselves. He talks about the most emotionally potent and formative of life's experiences, and the necessity of having them in tremendous variety before one is able to understand them. There must also be experiences one doesn't understand, like childhood illness, so the experience itself has laid a person bare and vulnerable. There are also circumstances of watching other people's vulnerability he says must be a part of one's experience before he has anything to offer, and even then, the fact that he says those memories have to have time to sink into the cells of a person suggests that he had spent a great deal of time in contemplation of his own experiences. Rilke writes from a place of invitation to a journey toward wisdom to which he has already whole-heartedly devoted himself, and with all humility that he will always still have lessons to learn and growing to do. His humility is perhaps the most winsome part of his voice.

The Dragon-Princess

The Dragon-Princess Summary

Mood introduces the next piece of prose by pointing out that it is taken from a letter written when Rilke was in his twenties, and its universal affirmation is rooted in the fact of Rilke's tentativeness as he writes it. Mood posits that "unambiguous affirmation is sentimentality" and that there is no sentimentality here.

Rilke's first point in the excerpt is to establish that individuals are, in fact, solitary, but so afraid to face it that no one ever does. If he did, the realization would be overwhelming, like having everything his eye was accustomed to resting on removed, and being set adrift in space. It would be in that state, however, if one were only to acclimate himself to it, that one could allow for the possibility of truly revolutionary, innovative, independent possibilities. Visions of the spirit world happen in intense solitude, and it is because so much of humanity has separated itself from those experiences that the senses with which they are discovered are so badly atrophied.

He surmises that the experience of human relationships has been traumatized by that same fear of the inexplicable as has the experience of the individual. People are so afraid of unpredictability that they don't allow for anything but the same predictable patterns in their relationships that they have seen in others regardless of how healthy or appropriate they are. He compares the human experience to a room of which most people only get to know a corner, and proposes that the really unique experiences of humanity, like those in the writing of Poe, come when people are willing to explore the scary remainders of their rooms. People are, after all, perfectly suited to the lives into which each of them have each been placed. Everything in one's own world is of his own making, and so his to know, love, and shape. The scary things could, in the end, only be scary because it needs something from the individual who has been afraid to give it, i.e., the dragon that becomes a princess.

The Dragon-Princess Analysis

The fact that Rilke was only in his twenties when he wrote this letter is remarkable by itself. His ideas are both typical of someone eager to tackle the world and adulthood in a way no one else ever has, and remarkable in their insight into why the human experience has been flawed. To understand the benefit of solitude at such a young age, and be willing to forge through its tremendous insecurity to the wisdom and insight that it would have to offer is indicative of his having done a good amount of contemplation in solitude already. His ideas about humanity's shunning spiritual experiences to the point of losing the capacity to comprehend them are the beginnings of ideas he carries throughout his writing career, as he encourages his readers to invite the spiritual and eternal in to one's experiences and to continue to be teachable.

There is a note of youthful optimism and brazen hopefulness in his call for people to break out of the patterns human relationships had been following for thousands of years, but if people were to take the advice in the spirit in which it was intended and meet each other as whole and respected equals, allowing each other to bring all of themselves to and through a relationship, exploring each other's possibilities and allowing one another to grow, it would be valuable wisdom indeed. The invitation to explore one's own inner room is beautifully amplified and sweetened with the reminder that each one is placed in this life as into the element for which he is best suited, and as with the unique ability among living things to shape and know it in order that it might be a source of satisfaction and nurturing.

The Difficulty of Dying: Rilke's Self-Composed Epitaph

The Difficulty of Dying: Rilke's Self-Composed Epitaph Summary

The next section of the book is dedicated to Mood's analysis of the epitaph Rilke wrote roughly a year before his death in order that it might be engraved on his tombstone. The epitaph reads, "Rose, oh pure contradiction, desire, / to be no one's sleep under so many / lids." Mood spends the first part of the section discussing the contradiction it was to Rilke's desire and belief to have had a cross also placed at his grave, something his daughter did, and with which his grandson and most of his readers disagreed.

Next, he moves to his analysis of the epitaph, beginning with the rose. Throughout Rilke's poetry, the rose is symbolic of the pairing of life and death, and death and love, as in the poem from his twenties entitled "Advent," in which the roses are symbols of love and of the very temporal nature of life and love, dying even as they are braided into his lover's hair. From there, Mood points to the second phrase, "oh pure contradiction" and refers to the bloom itself as simultaneously becoming its most beautiful and approaching death.

"Desire" finishes the first line, and the description of the rose, equating his descriptors, so that the rose equals contradiction, which equals desire, according to Mood. Desire's being equated with contradiction also hints that desire is synonymous with death in the epitaph. Mood moves to the first words of the second line, "to be no one's sleep" and points out that the rose symbolizing Rilke's death is still being invoked in its living, blooming state. Mood points out that Rilke's life-long postulation had been that death is a vibrant and present part of life: not its end, but simply its reverse side, as present at birth as at any other point. The living, the desiring, the achievement of the contact with the universal mystery that comes with death is to be aspired to according to Rilke as the consummation of life, like the rose in full bloom.

The space "under so many lids" is a reference to another of Rilke's earlier poems, entitled, "The Rose Window" in which he describes the many eyelids that are a rose's petals to be concealing a nothingness that sees everything: a "world-inner-space" in which one is completely still and untouched, meditating and breathing in solitude. It is a space in which there is still a resonant vibration to which Rilke referred several times, and that he regarded as sacred and called "a body of nothing but radiance" in "Sonnets to Orpheus." The fact of its belonging to no one is another joining of contradictions, in which the petals and the space they create are united by the fact that as soon as one were to peel away the petals, the space would be gone.

The final symbol in the epitaph is that of Orpheus himself, whom Rilke called the rose, and to whom his final poems were addressed. Orpheus, the god of song, symbolizes all

that is left after the rose, the poet are gone, that being the songs and poems themselves. Mood points out that Rilke accomplished in that one final poem the thing he said every living being ought to strive to do, that is to invite death to be a participant in and witness to all of the glories of life and thereby approach its coming with confidence.

The Difficulty of Dying: Rilke's Self-Composed Epitaph Analysis

Mood, having made such a comprehensive study of Rilke's writing, and admiring it so ardently is uniquely equipped to examine and decipher Rilke's epitaph, and approaches the task as sacred. His opening with the story of how Rilke's daughter placed the cross on his grave demonstrates his sensitivity to Rilke's atheism, and is offended in sympathy with those members of his family who also understood and respected his perspective.

The two-line poem Rilke wrote to be his epitaph is both consummately symbolic and enveloping of his entire writing career. The themes that had been most dear to him all find expression in it. Love is symbolized in the rose if only for the rose's significance in that theme in culture at large. For Rilke, the rose symbolizes the evolution that happens in a lifetime from youth through full bloom to death, and all of those phases are present in each of the others. It is a complete life-cycle in a single bloom, just as Rilke's writings suggest death and the wisdom gained by a lifetime of experiences ought to be present in every living moment. Desire, while synonymous with the rose and its built-in contradiction of life and death, is also synonymous in the sense that men's striving to grow and to learn comes from the desire to infuse significance into his life and legacy.

The space's existence parallels the reality of life's being co-existent with death, the bloom of the rose containing its promise of contact with the eternal world symbolized in its inner space. The fact that he sees death as not an end but as his joining the next realm, not as sleep but as continuation, allows him to reclaim his old image of the space inside the rose, symbolic of the solitary place of contemplation in the presence of the gods. Behind him on earth, he can leave his lifetime of poetry, prose and friendships, having prepared himself for death by living very well.

Characters

Rainer Maria Rilkeappears in Throughout

The writer and poet on whose life's work this book is focused is a turn-of-the-century writer and thinker who inspired the author, John L. Mood with his wise and eloquent prose and sensual and insightful poetry. The major themes in his work centered around the importance of continuously learning in the subjects of love and life, and to allow for all of the phases of one's life to inform the others. Most pointedly, sex is a teacher to him about spirituality and each human's connection with the whole of humanity, and death is, according to Rilke, a fact of life to be embraced and invited to inform and lend timeless significance to every one of life's experiences. Rilke was very outspoken in his writing on the subject of female empowerment and the need for a complete change in the way men and women approach their interactions, and in those subjects, he was generations ahead of his time. He forged close friendships with psychoanalyst and author Lou Andreas-Salome, feminist Ellen Kay, sculptor Auguste Rodin, writer and philosopher Fredrick Nietzche, Sigmund Freud and several other of the most progressive thinkers of his time.

He did his writing in German, and much of it when he was in his forties, after he had lived and experienced a good deal. He called on symbolism from nature and classic literature, but the major themes of his writing are his own completely original and unique ideas, a characteristic attributable to the fact of his life experiences and extensive study.

John L. Moodappears in Throughout

It is Mood's perspective through which Rilke is surveyed, and his favorite excerpts that are presented. Mood's admiration for Rilke's unabashed proclamation of ideas about feminism and male and female relationships that only began to gain ground in culture in the 1960s when Mood was reading Rilke's work. He is also inspired by his perspective on the importance of continuing one's dedication to learning throughout one's life in the areas of love and

Orpheusappears in References to

Orpheus, the Greek god of poetry and song, and charmer of animals and trees, symbolizes song and its presence is nature in Rilke's poetry. The rose is also symbolic of Orpheus ans vice-versa.

Male Lover

The lover in the phallic poems is a nurturing and adoring lover, enjoying the woman and her body the way one enters a temple or a beautiful place in nature. He speaks symbolically of their lovemaking, as if he were leaving her offerings.

Female Lover

She is the object of the poet's worship and compared in his adoration with a tree, the heavens, a temple, and a mountain.

The Young Girl

The young lover who competes with the poet for the freedom to play with her own breasts during love-making.

Lamenting Woman

She is the woman wishing to feel the touch of her lover as she stands under trees, and in the second poem, who notes with sadness that the garden goes on growing even while she is so sad.

Maturing Girlappears in Poem from end of 1923

The girl whose piggy-tails in youth change to curls pinned-up when she is older, coincident with her changing body and dress.

Lou Andreas-Salomeappears in Introduction

Rilke's long-time lover, a writer and psychoanalyst.

Fredrick Nietzcheappears in Introduction

Philosopher and writer, and close friend to Rilke, thereby shaping his perspective and voice.

Objects/Places

The Rose

The rose symbolizes the unity of life and death, and the earthly memorializing of the sacred expanse of eternity and the silence of solitary contemplation.

A Lover's Wombappears in Phallic Poems

Throughout the Phallic Poems, the woman's womb is described in metaphors ranging from trees to temples of Hermes, to the heavens, to a mountain.

The Poet's Penisappears in The Phallic Poems

Just as the woman's womb is described in metaphor, Rilke describes his own manhood with images like a rocket, the bud of a flower, the image of a god, a pillar, a tree and an exploring child.

The Tombstoneappears in Epitaph

Rilke composed a two-line poem to be engraved on his tombstone featuring the major symbols and themes from his poetry.

Venusappears in January, 1924, I

The light in the sky that doesn't depend on darkness like all the other stars in the sky.

The Crossappears in Epitaph

Rilke's daughter placed it on his grave in response to her own religious convictions even in spite of the well-known fact that Rilke had no affinity for the traditional church.

The Space in the Roseappears in Epitaph

The place below the inner-most petals of a rose in which Rilke wrote all of heaven was symbolized, and visited in moments of solitary meditation and stillness.

The Orangeappears in The Poet Praises

Rilke urges the young girls to dance the orange, letting it symbolize the womb and home.

Fireappears in Throughout

Fire symbolizes destruction and beauty, bringing with it both surrender to one's fate and celebration of one's victories.

Summerappears in Throughout

Summer appears as a symbol of life and a warm haven of beginnings and resurrections.

Themes

The Importance of Continuing to Learn

From the very first characterization of Rilke as a man and a writer, Mood was talking about how impressively Rilke was dedicated to the task of being a learner, a beginner, never satisfied with a level of growth, but humbly aware that there is always more growth to be accomplished. Rilke himself talks about that theme in his Letters on Love, in several aspects of male and female relationships. Regarding the condition of the individuals coming into the relationship, he proposes that each must be committed to retaining their own identities and autonomies, in order that they each always have something of their own to bring to the relationship. By contrast, when couples throw everything they have been at the other, keeping nothing to cultivate on their own, their coming together is dependent completely on the vision of something that must now be made of nothing. In the relationship itself, Rilke implores that participants give themselves to the task of learning to love, particularly to learning to be lovers and participate in some quality way in sex, in order that they might leave a legacy worthy of the aspiration of those who will follow them. He writes that loving is he hardest work one will ever do, and sex is the highest responsibility.

In "Blood-Remembering," Rilke writes that even following a lifetime of learning and attentively observing all of the experiences of life, one has to reflect and even forget all of it before it has become a completely integrated part, and ready to be passed on. Wisdom must become a cellular reality before it is truly owned and ready to be given.

Finally, regarding the perspective one ought to have on one's life both as one is living, and as one reflects on it after having lived, Rilke writes that the highest aspiration is to live in celebration and abandonment to life's experiences, and invite death as a partner to which one has been betrothed throughout life and with which one can live harmoniously in it. Death can offer a perspective in life and a insight into the eternal and sacred after life, and so should be allowed to offer wisdom and light-hearted participation in the life that leads up to it.

The Beauty of Romantic Love

The first half of the book is dedicated to the theme of romantic love, and Rilke's perspective on it is both revolutionary and invaluable. He proposes that participants in it dedicate themselves not only to their own cultivation, but to the protection of the freedom of their lover to cultivate their own mind and life, as well. When two people are able to meet as equals, both worthy of each other's attentions in the beginning, it only stands to reason that those qualities ought to remain highly prized throughout their time together, so that each remains whole and able to maintain their progress toward self-realization. There is a form of respect inherent in that idea that would have been highly rebellious and revolutionary in his period in history, when men were the only members

of the business or governing world, and women were social and domestic creatures only. For each to be entitled to his and her own aspirations and goals is a possibility that would be only exceptionally realized for generations to come, and revealed a respect for every form of humanity in Rilke that made him a truly remarkable figure in his generation.

His phallic poems also communicates a beauty of mind and understanding that would have been as unique at the turn of the century as it is now. Rilke pointed out himself that there was something eschew in people's view of sex that allowed them to camp either in the thought that sex was for pleasure only, and so to be a slave to adrenal appetites or to reside in the conviction that sex was filthy and to be shunned in all of its forms, as thought the Puritans and Victorians. Rilke's perspective, that it is a form of ecstatic expression, of communion with all of nature, and a gesture of intense appreciation for the soul of a person as well as for their body, inspired him to dedicate himself to considering it a task only ever to aspire to mastering. He recognized such a monumental import in it that he wanted always to be growing in it, and in that state, wrote beautiful poems of pure and unabashed appreciation and revelry.

The Transformative Power of the Knowledge of Death

Death was a startlingly common, and disarmingly gentle theme in Rilke's work. In the poem labeled "Christmas, 1922" and in "The Poems Praise," Rilke posits that a man who understands his place before death will give himself to celebration and throw oneself toward death with abandon. Life and death were so entwined in Rilke's mind that he was sure men's perspectives would be corrected by inviting its presence into daily experience. He even spoke candidly about understanding those who would murder, as acting out of their own grieving, perhaps over their own inevitable ends. He saw death as present as a coming transition, without threat, from very birth: from the blooming of the rose from its bud, and invited its perspective and opening of horizons. His constant mindfulness of the coming of death might also have been what motivated him to see life as such a striving for growth and improvement: if this life were so limited, he thought one ought to cram all of the learning and productive experience into the time as possible. His poems certainly centered around wringing every drop of truth and beauty from life's experiences, even from moments of silence, and on connecting life's experiences with the eternal and spiritual world that would outlast them.

Style

Point of View

Mood writes as an ardent admirer of Rilke's work, with the motivation of filling out the available English translations of Rilke's work. He has so enjoyed his own study of the man's writing, he wants to complete the picture other admirers and newcomers to his work could have of his collective contribution to poetry and literature, feeling that other translators have fallen a little short. He includes both prose and poetry, and includes explanations before every chapter both to explain why he has made the selections he has, and to put his selections in historical and literary context. The prose he choses is from Rilke's essays and letters, and all offer insight into his perspectives and philosophies that aid the reader in understanding the symbolism and motivation behind his poetry.

Perhaps the most helpful part of Mood's perspective is his admiration of Rilke's having been so far ahead of his time in the sense of his strong feminist perspective, as well as his literary sophistication and sensitivity, particularly in the case of his introduction to the Phallic Poems. For those poems to have been introduced without any context, they might have been startling, or not taken seriously. With his introduction and his having placed them after his letters on love, so the reader has a sense of his voice upon approaching them, they are much more palatable.

Setting

Rilke did his writing at the turn of the century, having been contemporary with and close to such revolutionary thinkers as Nietzsche, Freud and Rodin, as well as particularly feminist thinkers like Ellen Kaye and Lou Andreas-Salome. Having written at that time in history means that when he was talking about autonomy and mutual respect in male-female relationships, he was one of only a very few voices speaking from that perspective. He was also overt in his description of sex that, although literally beautiful and eloquently written, would have been incredibly startling for the Puritanical European audience that would have been seeing his work first. His work was highly rebellious and revolutionary in the setting in which it was written.

Mood, his translator in this book, was writing in the 1960s when the feminist and civil rights revolutions were taking place, and writing that encouraged personal growth and responsibility broadly and strong feminist ideals specifically would have resonated with even more relevance than at any other moment in history. Mood's particular fascination, then, with the themes of romantic love from Rilke's perspective, when understood to have been encountered when women were demanding that their voices be heard, makes perfect sense.

Language and Meaning

Rilke's work was composed in German, and Mood did the translation for this book, being very careful to preserve both the tone of his prose and the tone and lyrical beauty of his poetry. Both of those facts become incredibly valuable as the reader encounters the ideas Rilke was expressing in such eloquent depiction. Mood translates Rilke's poetry taking special care to bring with the meaning of the poems their meter and rhyme, as closely as translation to English allows. Particularly in the case of the Phallic Poems, the artfulness of his translation is immensely valuable in order that the reader might encounter his ideas as artfully presented as their original author had intended to present them.

Rilke had intended to speak to the themes of love, relationships, life as an education and a journey, and death as a progression to a higher plane visited in moments of holy contemplation and encounters with the sacred during life. Mood's extensive study of Rilke's work ahead of his translation ensures that his translation remains as true to the tone and intention of Rilke's original writing as possible, and does a great service to the reader of his translations. In particular, his careful examination of the literary and symbolic intention behind Rilke's epitaph offer the reader insight into the intention and passion of the writer that would require a similarly exhaustive independent study to achieve.

Structure

Mood was seemingly very careful in his organization of this book, categorizing Rilke's work according to topic and ordering the topics in such a way that the reader is prepared by the last for what will come next. For example, he presents Rilke's letters on love before his Phallic Poems so that the reader already understands his view of love as something to be approached like a sacred task, requiring a resolve to continue growing and learning throughout, and encouraging one's lover to do the same, before he introduces his poems, which would by themselves seem to engrossed in the physical to come from a mind capable of producing those themes.

He also organizes the poetry so it moves from the flesh progressively deeper until it has finally penetrated to be speaking to the deepest reaches of the human soul so that, by the time the reader has reached the end of the list of poems, he can see that all of Rilke's poetry is speaking to the soul and the deepest, most sacred and worshipful part of the human heart. His closing with the Epitaph's examination nicely rounds out his tome by reaching back through Rilke's entire career and tying together his themes in a single two-line poem, bringing all of his most important themes together, just as Rilke so obviously must have intended.

Quotes

I am convinced that these words of Rilke are of crucial importance for us who have, in the words of someone (I forget who), passed from puritanism to promiscuity without ever having experienced genuine love, eros, deep sensuality, what Suzanne Lilar (an unjustly ignored feminine thinker) called sacral love.
Introduction, page 27

A togetherness between two people is an impossibility, and where it seems, nevertheless, to exist, it is a narrowing, a reciprocal agreement which robs either one party or both of its fullest freedom and development. But, once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole and against a wide sky!
Rilke's Letters on Love, page 34

All companionship can consist only in the strengthening of two neighboring solitudes, whereas everything that one is wont to call giving oneself is by nature harmful to companionship: for when a person abandons himself, he is no longer anything, and when two people both give themselves up in order to come close to each other, there is no longer any ground beneath then and their being together is a continual falling.
Rilke's Letters on Love, page 35

Love is at first not anything that means merging, giving over, and uniting with another (for what would a union be of something unclarified and unfinished, still subordinate —?); it is a high inducement to the individual to ripen, to become something in himself, to become world, to become world for himself for another's sake; it is a great exacting claim upon him, something that chooses him out and calls him to vast things.
Rilke's Letters on Love, page 38

But if we nevertheless hold out and take this love upon us as burden and apprenticeship, instead of losing ourselves in all the light and frivolous play, behind which people have hidden from the most earnest earnestness of their existence — then a little progress and an alleviation will perhaps be perceptible to those who come long after us; that would be much.
Rilke's Letters on Love, page 40

We close a circle by means of our gazes, / and in it the tangled tension fuses white.
Phallic Poems III, page 55

See how in their veins all becomes spirit; / into each other they mature and grow. / Like axles, their forms tremblingly orbit, / round which it whirls, bewitching and aglow.
Other Love Poems, page 63

You declare you know love's nights? Have not bud / and sepal of soft words blossomed in your blood? / Are there not on your beloved body places / which recollect like open faces?
Other Love Poems, page 65

Life and death: they are one, at core entwined. / Who understands himself from his own strain / presses himself into a drop of wine / and throws himself into the purest flame.
The Poems Praise, page 83

Being-silent. Who keeps innerly / silent, touches the roots of speech, / Once for him becomes then each / growing syllable victory: / over what in silence keeps not silent, / over the insulting evil; / to dissolve itself to nil, / was the word to him made evident.
The Poems Praise, page 85

Here is magic. In the realm of a spell / the common word seems lifted up above... / and yet is really like the call of the make / who calls for the invisible female dove.
The Poems Praise, Magic, page 89

You alone are origin. / The world gets up with you, and beginning glistens / on all the breaking-places of our failure...
Poems on Other Difficulties, page 99

For it is not yet the memories themselves. Not till they have turned to blood within us, to glance and gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves — not till then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a verse arises in their midst and goes forth from them.
Blood-Remembering, page 112

That mankind has in this sense been cowardly has done life endless harm; the experiences that are called "visions", the whole so-called "spirit-world", death, all those things that are so closely akin to us, have by daily parrying been so crowded out of life that the senses with which we could have grasped them are atrophied. To say nothing of God.
The Dragon-Princess, page 118

Topics for Discussion

Rilke suggests that in romantic relationships, there is a danger of throwing too much of oneself into the union, and so losing the part that was "you" in the first place. Do you think that is still a danger today, or was that particular to the 19th Century culture in which he wrote? Explain.

Between Puritanism and promiscuity, Rilke hints at something called sacral love. What do you think he meant by that? Do you think his observation that people are missing it is still true today?

Rilke's love poems are intensely intimate and distinctively graphic. Do you think it was his intention to be shocking? What else might have been his motivation in writing so particularly about that moment in lovemaking?

Rilke's sexual imagery is dominantly taken from nature. In what way does that imagery work in accomplishing what you imagine were his goals?

Discuss "The Poet Speaks of Praising." What do you think he was trying to impress or inspire when he met all of those potential frustrations with praise. Whom or what do you suppose he was praising?

In "The Force of Gravity", what do you think Rilke was intending to symbolize? Was he effective? Explain.

Choose a poem and discuss its symbolism and its effectiveness in communicating what you surmise to be its intended message.

What do you understand to be the significance of death as a theme and symbol in Rilke's work? Do you think it is effectively used in the examples given here? Explain.

In "The Dragon-Princess," Rilke postulates that people live incomplete existences because they are too afraid to explore the whole of their "rooms." What do you see as being the rest of most people's rooms? Do you think that is something that has improved in most people's experiences since the turn of the century when Rilke wrote? Explain.