

Virtue Study Guide

Virtue by George Herbert

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Contents

Virtue Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Author Biography.....	5
Plot Summary.....	7
Themes.....	10
Style.....	12
Historical Context.....	13
Critical Overview.....	14
Criticism.....	15
Critical Essay #1.....	16
Topics for Further Study.....	20
Compare and Contrast.....	21
What Do I Read Next?.....	22
Further Study.....	23
Bibliography.....	24
Copyright Information.....	25



Introduction

"Virtue" is one of the poems in a collection of verse called *The Temple* (1633), which George Herbert wrote during the last three years of his life. By then, he had taken holy orders in the Anglican Church and become rector in Bemerton, England, near Salisbury. Herbert's poems are lyrical and harmonious, reflecting the gentle voice of a country parson spreading the Christian message. He appreciates the beauty of creation not only for its own sake but also because he sees it as a mirror of the goodness of the Creator. Yet, despite Herbert's sense of the world's loveliness, his poems often reflect the transience of that beauty and the folly of investing it with any real value. In "Virtue," he presents a vision of an eternal world beyond the one available to sense perception.

Implicit in "Virtue" is a delicately expressed struggle between rebellion and obedience. The understated conflict lies between the desire to experience worldly pleasures and the desire—or as Herbert would insist, the need—to surrender to the will of God. The battle waged between rebellion and obedience can be seen more clearly in one of the best-known poems in *The Temple*, "The Collar." Therein, the poet "raves" against the yoke of submission that he must bear until he hears the voice of God call him "child"; then, he submissively yields, as the poem ends with the invocation "My Lord!" This conclusion indicates that what the narrator feels about the experience of the natural world is of less authenticity than an inner voice of authority that directs him toward God.

Herbert's poetry displays a conjunction of intellect and emotion. Carefully crafted structures, like the first three quatrains, or four-line stanzas, of "Virtue," all of which are similarly formed, contain sensuously perceived content, like depictions of daytime, nightfall, a rose, and spring. Such a combination of intellect and emotion, in which the two forces, expressed in bold metaphors and colloquial language, struggle with and illuminate each other, is most apparent in the poetry of one of Herbert's contemporaries, John Donne, and is called metaphysical poetry. In "Virtue," an example of this combination of the intellectual and the sensuous can be seen in the second line of the third quatrain, when the spring is compared to a box of compressed sweets.

In "Virtue," which comprises four quatrains altogether, Herbert reflects on the loveliness of the living world but also on the reality of death. Building momentum by moving from the glory of a day to the beauty of a rose to the richness of springtime, while reiterating at the end of each quatrain that everything "must die," Herbert leads the reader to the last, slightly varied quatrain. There, the cherished thing is not a tangible manifestation of nature but the intangible substance of "a sweet and virtuous soul." When all else succumbs to death, the soul "then chiefly lives." Not through argument but through an accumulation of imagery, Herbert contrasts the passing glories of the mortal world with the eternal glory of the immortal soul and thereby distinguishes between momentary and eternal value.

□Virtue□ and many other poems from *The Temple* can be found in *Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry*, edited by Alexander M. Witherspoon and Frank J. Warnke and published by Harcourt, Brace & World, in 1963.



Author Biography

Nationality 1: English

Birthdate: 1593

Deathdate: 1633

George Herbert was born into a wealthy and titled family at Montgomery Castle, in Wales, on April 3, 1593, as one of nine children. His father, Sir Richard Herbert, died in 1596, when George was three years old. His mother, Lady Magdalen Newport Herbert, was a patron of the poet and clergyman John Donne, who presided at her funeral when she died in 1627. Herbert was educated privately until 1605, when he attended the prestigious Westminster School as a King's Scholar. In 1609, he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, earning his bachelor's degree in 1613 and a master's in 1616. Two years later, he became a teacher, with the title of "reader in rhetoric," at Trinity, and a year later, in 1619, he was appointed orator for the university, a post that he held until 1628. In this capacity, he represented the university on public occasions, such as by delivering the welcoming addresses when King James I visited Cambridge. In this way, Herbert became known to the King, who, delighted by his performances, awarded him a yearly stipend.

Herbert's first poems were Latin sonnets that he wrote for his mother. In them, he argued that a more fitting subject for poetry than love for a woman was love for God. His first published verses appeared in 1612. They were two poems, also in Latin, written in memory of King James's son Prince Henry, who had died that year. In 1624 and 1625, Herbert was elected to Parliament to represent Montgomery. However, rather than pursuing a career in politics or as a courtier, which had been his intention, after the death of King James, he devoted himself to the priesthood. In 1630, Herbert took holy orders in the Church of England and became the rector of Bemerton, near Salisbury. He married Jane Danvers, the cousin of his mother's second husband, in 1629. During his three years as a priest, Herbert wrote *A Priest to the Temple; or, The Country Parson, His Character, and Rule of Holy Life*, in which he set forth a guide for pastors in caring for their parishioners and in developing their own spirituality.

On March 1, 1633, Herbert died of tuberculosis. He had always been sickly, and one of his reasons for not pursuing an academic career at Trinity College after graduation had been the taxing effect of study upon his unsteady constitution. From his deathbed, he sent a manuscript of poems called *The Temple*, in which is included the poem "Virtue," to his friend Nicholas Ferrar, a fellow clergyman, asking him to publish them if he thought they were worthy and would contribute to people's spiritual advancement. Ferrar indeed published the poems that year, and by 1680 the collection had gone through thirteen printings.

By all accounts, Herbert was a gentle and pious person with a sweet and generous nature. He helped rebuild the decaying church at Bemerton with his own money and



was loved and esteemed by his parishioners, whom he cared for spiritually and, when necessary, by sharing in their labor or giving them money. Izaak Walton, his first biographer, wrote of him, "Lowly was Mr. George Herbert in his own eyes, thus lovely in the eyes of others."



Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

Herbert begins "Virtue" with an apostrophe, or invocation. That is, here, he starts with a direct rhetorical address to a personified thing: as if speaking to the day, the narrator says, "Sweet day" and then characterizes the day as "cool," "calm," and "bright." Thus, for one noun, "day," he provides four adjectives. The rest of the line is made up of the adverbial "so," signifying intensity, repeated three times. Herbert is presenting a fairly generic image, without any action, as no verb appears among these eight words. Nor can a verb be found in the next line, which is a kind of appositive, or a noun phrase placed beside the noun that it describes. "The bridal of the earth and sky," which describes the "day," indicates no action, instead merely illustrating and amplifying the conditions depicted in the first line. That is, the "sweet day" is the bridal—the marriage, conjunction, or union—of the earth and the sky. In sum, Herbert presents a serene yet invigorating day and locates the reader in the celestial and terrestrial realms simultaneously, for the day in its loveliness brings them together.

Day, however, gives way to night, just as life gives way to death: "The dew shall weep thy fall tonight," the narrator asserts, turning a daily natural event, nightfall, into a metaphor. Beyond death, the line also suggests grief at the loss of paradise on Earth, the Fall, which is the original cause of death in the Judeo-Christian story of the Creation. The evening dew, invested with emotion and made to represent grief, is equated with tears, which are shed at nightfall over the Fall, the sin that brought death into the world.

Lines 5-8

In beginning the second quatrain with the word "sweet," Herbert continues to connect the beauty of nature with impermanence, as any "sweet" thing must, over time, lose its sweetness. Like the day, the rose is an emblem of earthly splendor. It is "sweet" like the day, saturated with color, and graced with magnificence. (*Angry* and *brave* are complex words in Herbert's usage, as aspects of their meanings have all but passed from English. *Angry*, in the seventeenth century, could signify "inflamed," while *brave* could signify "having a fine or splendid appearance." The suggestions of wrath and courage carried by these words also reinforce the rose's magnificence, as it is characterized thus as standing knowingly in the prospect of doom.) So magnificent is the rose that Herbert calls one who looks at it a "rash gazer." Here, "rash" suggests a lack of necessary caution in taking in a sight so dazzling that the gazer is moved to "wipe," or rub, "his eye," as one does in wonder. Also, a warning may be understood to be present in the word "rash": one who beholds the rose is in danger of desiring its seductive but transitory beauty over the sweetness of what endures in eternity, the soul itself.



As with the day, so with the rose: despite its living splendor, death awaits. □Thy root,□ buried in the earth, as it must be if the rose is to flourish, □is ever in its grave.□ Thus, life and death are entwined, and death is an ever-present aspect of life. Indeed, by emphasizing the common ground shared by the root, the source of life, and the grave, the receptacle for death, Herbert evokes two Christian lessons: first, that life contains elements of death and must inevitably give way to death and, second, that death is not finality but part of the continuum of existence. In awareness of death, one realizes the true meaning and purpose of life and will thus prepare his or her soul, through the exercise of virtue, for eternity.

Lines 9-12

The word □sweet□ begins the third quatrain as well, now describing the spring, which is subsequently characterized as □full of sweet days and roses.□ As such, the delights presented in the first two quatrains are contained in the third, and the narrator solidifies his suggestion of the earth's rich bounty. In the second line of the quatrain, spring is likened to □a box where sweets compacted lie.□ Then, as in the previous quatrains, the third line iterates the transience of earthly delights: □My music shows ye have your closes.□ Through this line, the narrator offers the poem itself as proof of his argument regarding the impermanence of things. By □my music,□ the narrator refers to the very verse being read, this poem. □Close□ is a technical term in music indicating the resolution of a musical phrase. Thus, the poetic verse, like everything else the narrator has so far depicted, must come to an end, as it temporarily does with the four stressed and conclusive beats of the twelfth line: □And all must die.□

Lines 13-16

Breaking the pattern established in the previous three quatrains, the final quatrain begins not with the word □sweet□ but with a limiting expression: □Only a.□ The reader has been told that the □sweet day,□ the □sweet rose,□ and the □sweet spring□ all □must die.□ In contrast to them is the soul: □Only a sweet and virtuous soul / . . . never gives.□ □Sweet□ is no longer used to denote an aesthetic quality, nor is the word sufficient to stand alone anymore; in fact, in being yoked with □virtuous,□ it is invested with a moral and spiritual dimension. The soul that is sweet and virtuous, unlike the spring, the rose, and the day, □never gives,□ that is, it never gives way to death, instead ever enduring. Such a sweet soul, disciplined by virtue like wood that has been seasoned, is fully strengthened. Lumber that has been seasoned, aged, and dried is more suitable for use in construction than is fresh lumber; □seasoned timber□ is sturdy and enduring. The conflagration suggested in line 15 by the image of □the whole world turn[ing] to coal□ alludes to chapter 3, verse 10, of 2 Peter, in the New Testament, where Peter speaks of □the day of the Lord,□ the judgment day when □the elements shall melt with fervent heat□ and □the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.□



Thus, the first three quatrains present images of earthly beauty, but each ends with the word "die." The last quatrain presents images of an eternal soul and of a conflagration that turns the whole world, except that virtuous soul, to blackened coal, and its last line ends with the word "live." As such, the entire poem, which all along warned of death, shows the way in which Herbert believes that he and his readers may achieve eternal life: by shunning transient glory and humbly embracing virtue.



Themes

The Transience of Earthly Beauty

Repeatedly, throughout the sixteen lines of "Virtue," Herbert asserts beauty's transitory nature. His warning is not that people themselves must die but that the things that delight people while they are alive must pass away. The word "thou," repeated in the last line of each of the first three stanzas, serves as an address to each of the day, the rose, and the spring. The word does not refer to the poet himself or to the reader, even if one hears associative and suggestive echoes in those directions. Consequently, Herbert's poem does not assume the character of a threat. It serves, rather, as an instrument devised to wean both poet and reader off dependence on the visible world for joy and spiritual nourishment in order to redirect both poet and reader to the inner cultivation of virtue.

The Interconnection of Life and Death

Besides expressing the impermanence of natural phenomena in "Virtue," Herbert also reveals the interconnection of the realms of life and death. The earth, which represents impermanence, and the sky, which represents eternity, are joined (by the day) in union in the second line of the poem. Similarly, the seventh line shows that a root, a source of life, and a grave, a tomb for life, share the earth as a common location. In the Christian story, Jesus's temporary journey into earthly death assures humankind of the existence of a way into eternal life.

The Power of Christian Virtue to Overcome Mortality

The last stanza reverses the despair built up in the first three, by expressing the notion that salvation is achieved through the cultivation of a "sweet and virtuous soul." Such a soul is formed, Herbert suggests, through appreciation of the beauty of nature, with the understanding that those natural objects, which indeed exercise a positive influence on the soul, must perish. The soul that is shaped by the appreciation of the sweetness of natural beauty "as long as that beauty is seen to be transient" can itself become sweet by refocusing its appreciation on the beauty of virtue, sacrifice, and the eternal afterlife.

Nature

Despite his poem's focus on the transience of earthly beauty and of the experience of earthly rapture, Herbert delights in the depiction of nature and natural phenomena. He brings the reader into the English countryside in springtime, to be dazzled by the light of day, the hue of a rose, the scent of the earth, and the dew-covered fields at evening, as well as by the music of the poet's appreciation of these things. Herbert introduces



natural images into his verse not as ends in themselves but as a means of carrying out the religious instruction to which the poem is devoted.

Faith

An implicit theme of "Virtue" is faith. Although what is visible to humankind in the poem is the transience of earthly delight and the decay of nature, the poem ultimately conveys what cannot be seen and must instead be felt: the existence of a quality, the soul, which exists in eternal delight in a dimension other than the one in which our bodies live. The first three quatrains show what the poet can actually see; the fourth refers to what he knows by virtue of the vision granted to him by his Christian faith. Faith allows him to see what is invisible to the eye.

Style

Anaphora

Much of the force and grace of "Virtue" come from the device of anaphora, which gives the poem its orderly and predictable structure and endows it with a soothing and even hypnotic quality. *Anaphora* is the repetition of words and patterns for poetic effect. This device is immediately apparent in the first line, with the triple repetition of the word "so." Moreover, the same poetic structure governs each of the first three stanzas, while the fourth stanza is shaped by a slight variation of this structure. Each of the first three stanzas begins with the word "sweet" and ends with the word "die." The second line of each stanza presents an image reflecting nature's splendor, while the third line of each stanza offers a diminution, or lessening, of that splendor. Each of the fourth lines contains four one-syllable words, with these four words nearly identical from stanza to stanza. The effect of anaphora is to make an argument by means of a pattern of language, as the use of anaphora suggests that in several different instances, the same laws apply. Finally, the variation allowed by the last stanza breaks the tension built up by the repetition, offering a solution, the practice of virtue, to a problem that had seemed unsolvable, transience.

Apostrophe

In poetry, *apostrophe* is the technique of calling upon or addressing a particular person or thing. In the first three stanzas of "Virtue," Herbert indirectly addresses the reader of the poem by directly addressing the day, a rose, and the spring. In the fourth stanza, he does not address the soul but instead talks about it. Thus, he differentiates his relationship to the eternal world of the soul from his relationship to the natural world. Also, he thus puts himself in the role of a teacher and a preacher, conveying a message about the natural world and its impermanence.



Historical Context

Lyric Poetry

Originally, a *lyric* poem was one sung to the accompaniment of a lyre, a small stringed instrument resembling a harp. In time, a lyric poem became such a poem that might be so accompanied even if it actually was not. Lyric poetry is characterized by the poet's giving intimate expression to his innermost thoughts and feelings, in a way that he could not simply by, say, telling a story. Herbert's "Virtue" reflects his inner delight at the loveliness of nature as well as his meditation in response to nature. Rather than telling a story, "Virtue" reveals an internal mood. In part because of the value given to human perception by the Renaissance, lyric poetry flourished during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England.

Metaphysical Poetry

Metaphysical poetry is the name given to the poetry written by a loose collection of seventeenth-century poets, including John Donne foremost as well as George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Abraham Cowley, Richard Crashaw, and John Cleveland. Metaphysical poetry is characterized by intellectual argument expressed in sensual imagery and a colloquial, or everyday, style of writing. (Writing that was colloquial in the seventeenth-century, of course, would not seem so in the twenty-first.) Sentence structure is often complex, and metaphors bring together images that might not at first seem appropriate, as Herbert does in "Virtue" when he speaks of the spring as "a box" in which "sweets compacted lie."

Devotional Poetry

While verse may be classified as metaphysical poetry based on formal, technical, and stylistic aspects, verse may be classified as devotional poetry based on the content and intention of the work. Devotional poetry is exactly what its name implies: poetry written, and intended to be read, as an act and expression of devotion to the Deity, as is all of Herbert's verse. Like metaphysical poetry, devotional poetry was especially prevalent in the seventeenth century, when the intersection of religion and politics dominated intellectual discussions; in fact, many of the authors of metaphysical poetry, including Donne, Vaughan, and Crashaw, are also renowned for their devotional poetry. In "Virtue," Herbert praises the virtue of the Creator by praising the beauty of the creation. Beyond that, he intuits from that beauty a dimension of existence attainable only through faith in and devotion to the Creator, not merely through what he has created.



Critical Overview

Next to his great contemporary John Donne, who was a family friend, fellow poet, and fellow churchman, Herbert is regarded as the foremost among the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets. His book of verse, *The Temple*, in which "Virtue" is included, enjoyed immense popularity throughout the seventeenth century in part because of the devotional aspect of his poetry and in part because of his reputation for having a character marked by gentleness and saintliness. His poetry remained popular despite the disfavor his religion, his family, and his allegiance to the monarchy earned him as a result of the displacement of the monarchy by the government of Oliver Cromwell between 1640 and 1660.

The great American intellectual Ralph Waldo Emerson, discussing Herbert's verse in his lecture "English Literature: Ben Jonson, Herrick, Herbert, Wooton," remarks that Herbert was "not content with the obvious properties of natural objects but delights in discovering abstruser relations between them and the subject of his thought." Emerson adds that Herbert's "thought is often recondite and far fetched yet the language is always simple and chaste" and that he demonstrated "the power of exalted thought to melt and bend language." In his essay "The Metaphysical Poets," T. S. Eliot comments, "In the verse of George Herbert . . . simplicity is carried as far as it can go." Russell Fraser, in an essay titled "George Herbert's Poetry," writes that "among makers of the short poem in English Herbert's peers are Yeats, Frost, Donne and Jonson, and Shakespeare at sonnets." This is high praise.

Criticism of "Virtue" is usually of the exegetical type, as it might be for scripture; *exegesis* is a type of critical investigation that sets out to clarify and explore the meaning of images of and allusions to objects like "dew" and "seasoned timber." For the general reader, such criticism can tend to be obscure and to make a poem seem more convoluted than it first appears. Nevertheless, when a reader can connect, for example, "dew" with Christ's grace or a "rose" with his simultaneous presence and departure, "Virtue" gains added breadth.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1



Critical Essay #1

*Heims is a writer and teacher living in Paris. In this essay, he attempts to show how a contemporary reader might approach Herbert's early-seventeenth-century poem *Virtue*.*

If poetry that is nearly four centuries old, like Herbert's lyric poem "Virtue," is to be meaningful to contemporary readers, something within that poetry must transcend its own time, bridging the distance between history and experience. If a poem cannot do these things, then it is only a museum piece—an artifact, a remnant of the past. Such a poem may be interesting to the general reader as a curiosity, for the glimpse it gives of another time; otherwise, it may be interesting to specialists and scholars as material to put under the microscope and dissect, allowing them to track down learned allusions and write largely unread scholarly articles. What, then, does "Virtue" have to offer a contemporary, common reader, rather than a scholar?

"Virtue" was written by a priest of the Church of England in a rural district of England sometime between 1630 and 1633, nearly a decade before Oliver Cromwell's Puritan Revolution and the beheading of King Charles I. Following in the tradition of "warning" verse, which reminds readers of the transience of the temporal world, however beautiful, and of the possible perils of the world to come, the poem appears on first reading to be lovely in a genteel sort of way and certainly transient itself. It is a poem of sixteen brief, alternately rhymed lines, made up of ninety-eight words in all, with the word "sweet" appearing six times and the word "die" three times. In addition, the word "die," which appears at the end of the fourth, eighth, and twelfth lines, dictates the rhymes of the preceding second, sixth, and tenth lines; the sounds of the first words of the seventh and eleventh lines, "thy" and "my," respectively, also accord with this rhyme scheme. The poem is not only brief, therefore, but also concentrated. It is composed of four stanzas and is structured anaphorically, meaning that each of the first three stanzas repeats the same established pattern, while the fourth offers a slight, and meaningful, variation of that pattern.

Each of the first three stanzas begins with an invocation, or an address: to the "day," to a "rose," and to the "spring." Each is called "sweet." The third line of each stanza reiterates the message of transience: day will fall; the earth that nourishes also serves as a grave; and musical phrases come to an end. The fourth lines of the three stanzas present similar warnings in almost identical words: "For thou must die," "And thou must die," and "And all must die." The last stanza offers what must be seen as a moral: While all the lovely delights of Earth will perish, the soul that has devoted itself to becoming "sweet and virtuous" will live.

"Virtue" is thus an instruction not only in how we must look at life but also in faith itself. Presenting what is clearly visible to the human eye in the first three stanzas, that is, impermanent earthly delights, the poem moves in the fourth stanza to what is invisible and is thus apparent only to the faithful: the permanence of the eternal life that follows death for the soul that is "sweet and virtuous." Herbert attempts to make his argument



more convincing by setting up a tension in the first three stanzas that he resolves in the fourth. Indeed, each of the first three stanzas ends in frustration, and through that frustration Herbert instills a longing in the reader. By heralding day, rose, and spring as desirable and then devaluing them in demonstrating their impermanence, Herbert fosters in the reader a desire for something worthy and permanent. Thus, by breaking, in the fourth stanza, the pattern that governed the first line of each of the first three stanzas, beginning with the word "only," Herbert resolves his poem's tension. The structure of his rhetoric naturally wins the reader to his position, even if only momentarily.

When he composed "Virtue," Herbert was writing for a like-minded audience. He was a pastor, and he was communicating a common belief among his followers, in a form intended to delight them and reaffirm what they knew. He was speaking not only to those in his small village, who could hear him preach his sermons on Sundays, but, indeed, to members of his religion throughout England. The poems in *The Temple*, of which "Virtue" is but one of many, are sermons, or lessons for the faithful. They are designed to strengthen faith by addressing resistance and celebrating acquiescence. This sort of verse is called "devotional poetry." For the poet, the verse exists as a testament of his faith; for faithful readers, it sings of their spiritual condition and offers the lyrical pleasure of dwelling in a familiar abode, as comforted by the reiteration of a common belief.

What, then, does "Virtue" offer to readers nearly four centuries later? The answer seems self-evident. For readers who share Herbert's belief, "Virtue" simply reinforces what they already feel and, as it did centuries ago, offers the consolation of a familiar and fundamental belief sweetly restated. For readers who do not share Herbert's belief, "Virtue" can be dismissed as old-fashioned piety not to their taste, or it can, perhaps, be enjoyed and esteemed as an aesthetic object. In either case, the apparent simplicity of the poem may present the greatest difficulty to contemporary readers of whatever persuasion. Whether read by those who agree with it or by those who do not, "Virtue" can be given a cursory glance and dismissed as a pretty set of verses. Scholars, certainly, can offer plenteous evidence to the contrary. They can show the poem's complexity and resonance through analyses of terms like "dew," "fall," and "seasoned timber." Dew can signify the presence of Christ. The word "fall" invokes the biblical story of the Fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden. "Seasoned timber" may suggest the soul that has been cured of its naive and youthful devotion to the manifestations of divinity in nature, allowing it to focus its devotion on divinity itself. The term may also refer, perhaps, to the cross upon which Christ was crucified. Such extensive analyses, however, do not make "Virtue" any more striking as a poem, rather making it only more doctrinal or obscure than it first appears.

The demands that "Virtue" makes on a twenty-first-century reader are different from the demands it made on seventeenth-century ones. In essence, it demands an aesthetic readjustment, which a responsible reading of the poem will help foster. That is, for the contemporary reader, "Virtue" is less about faith in a world hereafter than about the quiet contemplation of the present world in a gentle and penetrating spirit. Herbert's original intention, as revealed in the poem, was to show the impermanence of earthly



delight. As the poem highlights the melancholy aspect of earthly experience by dwelling upon what is disappearing, it compels the reader to in turn dwell upon the words of the poem. This compulsion comes about not because the words are complex or have scriptural resonance but because their pace is one of rhythmic slowness. For the contemporary reader, "Virtue" is as much about embedding oneself in the poem's present as it is about the deceptiveness of temporality.

After the image of the "sweet day" is first invoked in the poem's opening, it is extended by the languorous triple modification, "so cool, so calm, so bright." Implicit in the repetition is a rhythmic instruction to the reader: read this slowly. The tempo is *adagio*—leisurely, contemplative, slow, and balanced. As the short line proceeds, this implicit tempo marking is reinforced by the hard *k* sounds of "cool" and "calm" and by the opening and closing consonants of "bright." The opening *b* of "bright" prevents any elision, or sliding together of sounds, with the *o* of the preceding "so," which an opening vowel would have allowed. Similarly, the *t* at the end of "bright" forces the reader to stop, making the line a self-contained unit despite the lack of a verb. Only with a new intake and release of breath can the reader attack the second line's first word, "the," which is followed with another *b* barrier, in the word "bridal."

This pattern of forced retardation continues in the third line and recurs in the succeeding stanzas. In the first line of the second stanza, "sweet rose" forces the reader to negotiate the trill between the two words. Following immediately is the hurdle of *h*'s presented by "whose hue"; the reiterated *oo* sound also delays the reading. At its end, the line skids to a halt with the *v* sound in "brave." Over the next lines, many of the same sounds from the first stanza are employed, like the *b* of "bids" and the *th* of "thy." Even when new sounds are introduced, they have the same effect of keeping the tempo of the poem slow.

Only in the final stanza does the rhythmic pattern change. The opening vowel of "only" begins what in the context of "Virtue" is a forward tumble of sounds: The reader is propelled by the easy connection between the *t* of "sweet" and the succeeding "and," as well as by the elision of "virtuous" and "soul," through the blending of the final *s* of "virtuous" and the initial *s* of "soul." The second line of the fourth stanza, unlike lines 2, 6, and 10, presents no pause, instead offering a continuation of the first line: "Only a sweet and virtuous soul / Like seasoned timber." The *l* of "soul," with which the first line terminates, reappears immediately as the initial sound in the first word of the second line, "like." Similarly, the *d* of "seasoned" merges with the *t* of "timber."

This kind of minute examination of the most basic elements of "Virtue," the individual letters of individual words, illuminates the way in which Herbert achieved certain aesthetic effects. Indeed, simply undertaking such an examination disciplines the reader to pay attention to the smallest details of objects of the senses and to the process of perception itself. Thus, while the primary notion expressed in the poem is that the phenomena of the natural world are transient and ought not distract one from the eternity of the supernatural world, the poem itself contradicts that notion by demanding



a focused and steady attention to its most minute details and, consequently, to its mechanics and to the images represented within it.

Thus, in a sense, "Virtue" seems to be separated from its author's apparent intention: rather than warning a reader not to become fixated on the created world, it stands as a work of human creation demanding absorbed attention. The poem itself is not transient but endures as an object worthy of contemplation across the boundaries of time, as confirmed by succeeding eras. Somewhat paradoxically, while "Virtue" warns against attending to day, rose, and spring as if they were permanent, it demands the reader's lingering attention to itself. Yet, in truth, no contradiction exists. At the core of this earthly, aesthetic object, a mortal creation, is what Herbert believed to be an immortal truth; indeed, "Virtue" instructs the reader in Christian dogma. Moreover, in contemplating the poem, the reader is not truly contemplating that transient something, essentially an artifact of nature. Rather, the reader is contemplating the transformation, by the poet's art, of the transient into the permanent, as the poem itself tempers the way in which the reader perceives the world. What makes something eternal is not only its duration in time but also the depth of people's consciousness, their perception, of it. In this respect, intensity is as much a dimension as time. When it succeeds, that is, when a reader yields to its demands, "Virtue" acts as a vehicle for the expression of the eternal. The poem also compels the reader to reside in and as such create an aspect of permanence, rather than allowing that reader to yield to the hurry and inattentiveness that endow an experience with an aspect of transience.

Source: Neil Heims, Critical Essay on "Virtue," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

In an essay, discuss whether Herbert's "Virtue" is or is not significant in the twenty-first century.

Virtually all religions present some idea of what happens to people after they die. In an essay, consider the following questions: If you are religious, what are the teachings of your religion about what happens after death? If you are not religious, what ideas have been taught to you about what happens after death? What are your own beliefs about what happens after death? Are they in accord with what you have been taught, or have you developed other ideas? Is death a serious concern to you, or is it something you do not think about? Fully explain all of your responses.

Consider a loss you have suffered. In an essay, discuss the nature of the loss, how it affected you, and how you coped with it. Then conduct interviews with six people regarding loss and coping with it. Present your results to your class, analyzing the responses and comparing and contrasting the nature of the responses with consideration for the age of the respondents.

Write a dialogue in which two characters, one a believer in God and one a nonbeliever, discuss Herbert's poem "Virtue."

In "Virtue," Herbert focuses on the transience of the delights of the natural world. Rewrite the poem using products of technology instead of natural phenomena.



Compare and Contrast

1630s: Most of England was made up of cities and villages that were integrated with the natural world depicted in Herbert's □Virtue.□

Today: After the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century and urban development of the twentieth, England is no longer the green, open country it was in Herbert's time. However, through concerted conservation efforts much of the nation's forest land has been restored.

1630s: Universities like Cambridge were dedicated primarily to educating young men to serve in the priesthood and thus focused on divinity studies.

Today: The great English universities provide secular education in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities to male and female students alike.

1630s: The English monarchy was the central governing power.

Today: England is a constitutional monarchy in which the government is made up of an elected prime minister, an elected House of Commons, and a House of Lords, some of whose members are elected and some of whom hold hereditary positions. The monarchy has no real governing power and as such is rather a symbolic institution providing England with a cultural identity.



What Do I Read Next?

□Life,□ available in Alexander Witherspoon and Frank Warnke's *Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry* (1963), is another poem of Herbert's from *The Temple*. Like □Virtue,□ it focuses on how nature's products die off and thereby reveal the fate of humankind.

In □On My First Son,□ a lyric written in 1603, also available in Witherspoon and Warnke's *Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry* (1963), Ben Jonson laments the death of his son at the age of seven years. Jonson tries to balance his profound grief with the consolation that death has put his beloved child in a state he ought to envy rather than regret, in removing him from earthly care.

In act 4, scene 2, of his play *Cymbeline* (c. 1612), William Shakespeare introduces a funeral lament, □Fear No More the Heat of the Sun,□ in which the singers console themselves over the fact of death by accepting its inevitability and its power as liberator from the cares of the world.

Robert Herrick's □To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time□ (1648), found in *The Works of Robert Herrick* (1823), like Herbert's □Virtue,□ contemplates the impermanence of time. Rather than offering the alternative of an eternal afterlife, however, Herrick advises that a fitting course of action is to seize the day before it departs and enjoy to the fullest what is offered on Earth.

The second poem in A. E. Houseman's cycle *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), □Loveliest of Trees,□ is a brief lyric in which the poet contemplates the beauty of nature with an awareness that he, not nature, will pass away.

In □Spring and Fall to a Young Child□ (1880), found in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1931), Hopkins considers the transience of life and nature from the point of view of an older man reflecting on a girl's experience of autumn.

In □Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night□ (c. 1945), found in *The Poems of Dylan Thomas* (1952), the Welsh poet celebrates fiercely holding onto life, despite the inevitability of death, to the very end.

Further Study

Dreiser, Theodore, *An American Tragedy*, Signet Classic, 2000.

Dreiser's 1925 novel, which traces the rise and fall of a poor boy striving to attain a position in the upper reaches of society, shows the struggle between the dazzling effects of transitory things upon the character of a young man who has lost a sense of eternally determined virtue.

Kushner, Tony, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, Theatre Communications Group, 1993-1994.

In his two-part, six-hour-long drama, Kushner shows the effect of AIDS on his characters' sense of the value of the transient world: AIDS makes that world more desirable and natural phenomena all the more ravishing. He also confronts a search for an eternal meaning beyond transitory experience, with insight into the value of life itself.

Ruskin, John, "The White-Thorn Blossom," in *The Genius of John Ruskin*, edited by John D. Rosenberg, Houghton Mifflin, 1963.

Ruskin's essay, written in 1871, discusses the destruction of England's green world, which he sees as representing the permanence of natural values, by the overwhelming force of the Industrial Revolution.

Tolstoy, Leo, *Anna Karenina*, translated by Joel Carmichael, Bantam Books, 1978.

Tolstoy's great nineteenth-century Russian novel, which first appeared in its completed form in 1878, counterpoises a consciousness of the world's attractions with a sense of their inadequacy and an intimation of something eternal.

Wilder, Thornton, *Our Town*, in *A Treasury of the Theatre: From Henrik Ibsen to Eugene Ionesco*, 3d college ed., edited by John Gassner, Simon and Schuster, 1960.

In this play, set in a small New Hampshire town in the early twentieth century, Wilder focuses on the value of transient experiences, the futility of trying to hold on to these experiences, and the importance of living life to the fullest.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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



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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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