Why The Classics Study Guide

Why The Classics by Zbigniew Herbert

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Contents

Introduction

"Why the Classics" appeared in Zbigniew Herbert's first English translation of his poetry, *Selected Poems*, published in 1968. As is often the case with poetry, it is not clear exactly when the poem was written, only when it was finally published. Herbert began writing as a teenager, but he was 44 years old when *Selected Poems* was published; therefore, this poem might have been written at any point during those years. The primary themes of the poem□honor, responsibility, artistic authority, and experiences of the exile□are topical to the post World War II era but might also echo some of the realities of life in an oppressive communist state. Accordingly, this poem reflects many of the concerns that Herbert felt about society, especially a society in which his own culture had been destroyed by invading armies. Herbert has often used classical references and ideals in his work. His reliance upon classical works reveals Herbert's view that classical literature is an effective way to study and learn from the events of the modern world. Herbert was criticized for the inclusion of so much from classical antiquity in his poems. This poem shows one way that he chose to refute this criticism. Herbert's poem also exposes the keen disappointments of someone who thought that modern leaders have not learned from the examples of history.

In "Why the Classics," the author uses irony and models from classical history to point to the failings of modern military leaders he believes do not take responsibility for their own military failures. Using the fourth century b.c. historian and general, Thucydides, as an example, Herbert uses the first section of the poem to establish the ideal model: a leader who willingly accepts responsibility for failure, even when the responsibility for such failure is not clearly determined to have been the leader's fault. In the second section of the poem, Herbert compares this ideal model with the leaders and generals of more recent wars, who have no sense of accountability for the actions of their armies. Instead of accepting responsibility, leaders blame anyone or anything rather than blame themselves. In the third section, Herbert turns to literature and art that fails to relate the truth of injustice and instead wallows in self-pity and superficiality. Taken as a whole, Herbert's poem makes effective use of ancient history as a way to criticize Herbert's own world. Instead of the restraint and honesty of Thucydides, his modern counterpart is alternately arrogant, petty, and without talent.

Herbert believed in the value of classicism, with its emphasis on aesthetics, clarity, symmetry, and long-established forms. Certainly, it is reasonable to assume that Herbert's early life, marked by invasions, war, and loss of his homeland, all contributed to his reliance on classical antiquity in his poems. Classical thought provides not only a paradigm of excellence but also a model that has proved enduring. "Why the Classics" is typical of Herbert's poetry, which often turns to the past for inspiration and lessons to which a modern world might look for guidance.

Author Biography

Zbigniew Herbert was born on October 29, 1924 in Lwow (or Lvov), a city that was located in Eastern Poland and that later became a part of the Ukraine. Herbert was the son of a banker and professor, and the grandson of an Englishman, thus accounting for Herbert's very English surname. He was not even fifteen years old in 1939 when the Red Army invaded his city, as part of an agreement with Hitler. By 1941, when Nazis invaded the city, Herbert's city had become a concentration camp. Eventually Herbert joined the underground Polish Home Army and became actively involved in an anti-Soviet resistance movement after the Soviets recaptured Lwow in 1944, which was then annexed to the Soviet Union. After most of the Polish Home Army died during the Warsaw massacre of 1944, Herbert moved to Krakow, where he began his studies in law and philosophy at the University of Krakow. Herbert completed a master of arts in economics in 1947 and then began studying at the Copernicus University in Torun where he completed a law degree in 1948. Herbert next enrolled at the University of Warsaw where he earned another master of arts degree in 1950, this one in philosophy.

Herbert was seventeen when he began writing poetry, but it was 1956 before his first book of poetry, *A String of Light*, was published in Poland. This publication was a result of the liberalization of communist rule that permitted the publication of the first books of Polish poetry since the communists began to rule Poland. In the fifteen years prior to the publication Herbert wrote poetry, but the Nazi occupation, which was quickly followed by Stalinist rule, meant the censorship of all literary publishing.

After the relaxation of communist rule, Herbert began traveling outside of Poland and often visited England and Western Europe. A second volume of poetry, *Hermes, a Dog and a Star*, was published in 1957, and a third volume, *Study of an Object*, was published in 1961. Herbert next turned to prose and published a book of essays, *Barbarian in the Garden* in 1962. The poem "Why The Classics" appeared in Herbert's fourth volume of published poetry, *Inscription*, which was translated and published in English in 1968 as *Selected Poems*. Herbert is probably best known for *Pan Cogito*, published in 1974 and then translated into English as *Mr. Cogito* for its 1993 publication. His last book of poetry, *Elegy for the Departure and Other Poems*, was published in 1999.

Herbert married Katarzyna Dzieduszyska April 30, 1968. He was the recipient of many awards and honors, including the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences Award in 1964, the Nicholas Lenau Prize in 1965, the Alfred Jurzykowski Prize in 1973, the Petrarch Prize in 1979, the Bruno Schulz Prize in 1988, and the Jerusalem Literature Prize in 1991. For many years, Herbert and his wife lived outside Poland, first in West Berlin (1973—1981) and later in Paris (1984—1990), but Herbert and his wife always returned to Poland, where he was considered to be one of Poland's greatest post-war poets. Herbert died on July 28, 1998 in Warsaw, Poland.

Plot Summary

Lines 1—8

In "Why the Classics," Herbert impresses on the reader the importance of modern military leaders to learn accountability and honor from historical military leaders. Thucydides was a general and historian who initially participated in the lengthy war between Athens and Sparta and who later wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War. In the fourth book on the war, Thucydides relates stories of the battles and sieges in which he fought, and he also tells of his own efforts to survive the plague, a disease that decimated the Athenian population. According to Herbert, in his history, Thucydides includes the speeches that were made before battles, and he also relates the diplomatic side of the war, the spying and intrigue that are rarely included in histories written about great warfare. Herbert mentions these details because they establish the thoroughness of Thucydides's work. Then Herbert moves to the important point that he wishes to make about the great historian. In his history, Thucydides also included the details about his failures, even though the "episode is like a pin / in a forest." According to Herbert, Thucydides's failures, though small when taken in context of his great accomplishments, are important to remember because of their final cost to the great historian and leader.

Lines 9—13

The history that Herbert references in this section is important to know because it is a significant element to understanding why Herbert admires Thucydides. In 424 b.c. , Thucydides, who had seven Athenian ships under his control, failed to arrive in time to save his own home city of Amphipolis from an invasion by the Spartan general, Brasidas. This failure resulted in the loss of several nearby towns, whose inhabitants grew afraid that they would also not be rescued. Because of the fall of Amphipolis, Athens was forced to sign an armistice with Sparta that called for a truce of one year. The truce did not last, of course, and eventually the war resumed and Athens was defeated. With time, Brasidas came to be regarded as the founder of Amphipolis. Thucydides took responsibility, although it is unclear whether he was at fault for the fall of Amphipolis. He was exiled as punishment, and when he wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War, he included the details of his own failure to save his city. Herbert briefly summarizes these events in lines 9 through 11. Next, Herbert explains that Thucydides paid the debt he owed to his city "with lifelong exile." Thus when Herbert uses Thucydides, he argues that even though acknowledging a failure will result in extreme punishments, such as banishment, an honorable leader will do so because it is the honorable action to take.

Lines 14—15

In the final two lines of the first section Herbert reveals his own pain as an exile. His own city of Lwow was a victory prize for the Soviets at the end of World War II. As a Pole, he can no longer claim his own birth city, and while his actions did not result in the loss of Lwow to Poland□only the Soviets can claim responsibility for this loss□Herbert does feel pain that he could not save his town. His own culture has been destroyed, wiped clean by an invading army that has no respect for the history of the city or country. Herbert especially feels anguish since his own attempts at resistance were not successful. In 1944 when the Soviets reclaimed Lwow from the Nazis, Herbert became active with the anti-Soviet resistance and joined the underground Polish Home Army. Herbert makes the connection between the classical and the modern in his poem, just as Thucydides was unable to save his city, Herbert was unable to save his own city. Like the Athenian historian, Herbert lived out his life as an exile. As he states in line 15, Herbert knows the price of exile.

Lines 16—22

In the second section of "Why the Classics," Herbert moves to a comparison between Thucydides and those generals and leaders who fight modern wars. Herbert is deliberately vague in this section. Since he never specifies name, nationality, or period, his comments about modern leaders might be applied to all leaders who blunder ahead, causing loss of life and honor, and who fail to acknowledge their mistakes or take responsibility for their losses. In lines 16 and 17, Herbert imagines the generals of "recent wars," who if they suffered a loss such as the loss suffered by Thucydides, would instead "whine on their knees," while they also extol "their heroism and innocence." Today's generals would lament their losses, claim they had done their best, and then accuse others for their failures. Lines 20 through 22 explain Herbert's opinion that the generals of the "most recent wars" (line 16) blame either their subordinates or their colleagues, who are supposedly "envious." They even blame fate, those "unfavourable winds" that the ancient Greeks thought could shape one's destiny.

Lines 23—26

Thucydides, however, did not blame the winds of fate or those other generals who might have offered assistance but who did not, or his men, who perhaps slowed his arrival. Herbert reminds his readers that Thucydides offered only facts and no excuses: "he had seven ships / it was winter / and he sailed quickly." And still he was too late. Herbert offers only the facts, which are not mitigated by excuses or blame. Unlike those generals of recent wars, Thucydides accepts his responsibilities as a leader. Amphipolis was his home, and he could not save it. He resisted the opportunity to rewrite this history and mitigate his blame. Thucydides was a writer of history, and as such, he might certainly have downplayed his own blame but Thucydides did not choose to do so. Herbert admires this honesty, which while so important to an Athenian general who lived nearly 2500 years ago, is absent, Herbert feels, in modern generals.

Lines 27—34

In the third section Herbert expands on his comparison by calling upon the poet, who like those modern generals, also fails to show restraint and who fails to engage in poetic honesty. The third section of Herbert's poem appears to suddenly change topic, but in fact, the topic remains the same, although the example used to examine it has shifted. Herbert moves from generals to poets. According to Herbert, poetic verbosity has replaced talent, and self-pity has become art. The greatness of the poet has been reduced to "a small broken soul / with a great self-pity." Herbert suggests that the poet of today has ceased to focus on strength, and the reader is now subjected to weeping lovers in dirty hotel rooms. These final lines point to an important element of Herbert's poetry□the poet has a responsibility to illuminate injustice and create change. Rather than leaving a great legacy, Herbert states that all modern poets are leaving behind are images of dirty wallpaper and unhappy love affairs. The ancient Greek poets wrote of great battles and wars. Thucydides is perhaps better known as a historian than as a general. His *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* is a legacy that outlived the loss of his city, his supposed failures in battle, and his exile from his beloved native town. But today's poets will leave no such legacy according to Herbert's poem. Rather than great generals and poets, who in times past sought to inspire, the modern world offers weak generals and poets suffused with superficiality. It is worth noting that Herbert was often criticized for his inclusion of classical ideals in his poems, this poem shows one way that he chose to refute this criticism.

Themes

Classical Ideal

The classical ideal has traditionally been a concept by which people use the Ancient Greeks as a model to define what is valued in a society; often this is purity and integrity. An element of this idea is the classic hero, who provides a model of heroism and bravery for modern mankind. Greek myths were very important to Herbert and their influence permeates many of his poems. In "Why the Classics," Herbert uses Greek history to defend his use of Greek myth in so many of his poems. He finds that the ancient Greeks had much to teach us about modesty and about restraint. Rather than brag about exploits that did not happen or blame failures on others, the ancient Greek general Thucydides displayed a quiet acceptance and bravery in his defeat. Herbert uses the model of Thucydides to illustrate the weaknesses of modern generals who use bluster to hide their defeats, rather than look to the classical model for inspiration.

Exile

Herbert knows something of exile, having suffered exile for much of his own life. Herbert first experienced exile as a youth when his hometown was repeatedly invaded during war and later annexed to the Soviet Union at the end of Would War II. When the city of Lwow became a concentration camp for the inhabitants, Herbert became an exile within his own city. Even after moving to Krakow and later to Warsaw, Herbert became a de facto (not formally recognized or legally, but in fact a reality) exile while living in his own country; he was disinherited from his own culture and from the expression of his talent. Because of communist oppression, poets could not publish their work, and so Herbert wrote for fifteen years before his first book of poetry could be published. He became an exile from Poland as he moved around Western Europe looking for more literary freedom. Herbert's intimate knowledge of the life of an exile can be found in lines 14 and 15 of "Why the Classics." Herbert identifies with Thucydides, who suffers a lifelong exile from his native city. In his absence from his native city, Herbert understands well that "exiles of all times / know what price that is" when Thucydides makes the honorable choice in accepting responsibility. Herbert, of course, could have returned to his native city, but he would no longer be Polish and his cultural history would no longer exist. And as a citizen of the Ukraine, his freedoms would be even more limited. The inclusion of the words "of all times" link Herbert's experiences to those of Thucydides. For Herbert the choice is every bit as much an ethical choice as the one that Thucydides makes and the use of "price" makes clear that for Herbert the price was as dear as for Thucydides.

Honor

Honor for Thucydides and Herbert is closely linked to their lives in exile. Exile is the punishment for honorable behavior. This is true for both men. Thucydides chose to do

the honorable thing and take responsibility for the fall of his city. He could have blamed others, blamed the weather, blamed shifting winds or the Greek gods for their lack of help. Herbert describes this in his poem through the use of very matter-of-fact language: "Thucydides says only / that he had seven ships / it was winter / and he sailed quickly." Lines 23—26 offer no excuses, only the notation that Thucydides did the best he could do. It was not enough and the city fell. Honor demands accountability and the Athenian leader proved that he could be trusted. Herbert also demonstrated honor as a poet. Under communist rule, poets could write on accepted topics, often flowery praises of their government. At the very least, poets were expected to keep quiet about oppressive governments. Herbert refused to keep quiet. He often worked at menial jobs because he would not write what the communist government wanted him to write. His opposition to communism meant that his work was excluded from publication and he was denied membership in the Writer's Union.

Doing the honorable thing certainly led to Thucydides's inclusion in Herbert's poem. According to Herbert, Thucydides is a model for honorable behavior that modern generals and leaders would do well to emulate, and Herbert sees this honorable behavior as a model for his own life. For instance, Herbert concludes his poem with two stanzas that link poetry and artistic honesty with this example of ancient Greek honor. Herbert accuses modern poets of wasting their talents on weeping lovers "in a small dirty hotel." These subjects are a "great self-pity." As a result, Herbert asks, "what will remain after us?" These poets will leave no legacy of great works for history to judge as did Thucydides. Clearly Herbert wants more for himself. He immerses his poem in the ancient Greek tradition because this time and Thucydides have maintained their importance throughout history. According to Herbert, honor, whether revealed in a poet or a general, offers a model for modern man, generals, and poets.

Irony

In contrasting Thucydides's admission of responsibility to that of modern generals and leaders, Herbert uses irony to strengthen his argument and to point to the deficiencies of modern leaders, who all too often extol virtues they do not possess. In the first section of his poem, Herbert lists the trials that beset Thucydides as a general. In his history of the Peloponnesian War, he describes "battles sieges plagues," all of which he endured as a leader. Moreover, he also endured the "dense net of intrigues of diplomatic endeavours" during his many years of warfare. Herbert says that his one loss, the failure to save his native city of Amphipolis, was only a very small part of this great leader's experience. Hebert calls this loss "like a pin / in a forest." There is great irony in this comparison of a pin to a forest. The use of "pin" makes clear how great Thucydides's victories were when compared to this one loss. His willingness to claim responsibility for the loss of Amphipolis is only another measure of his greatness. Thus, Thucydides's legacy becomes more than his exile from his native city; his honesty and integrity are more significant legacies, and the reader knows this because Thucydides's only mistake was "like a pin / in a forest."

In the second section of the poem, Herbert offers a contrast. In this section his use of ironic language makes clear why Thucydides should be admired and why many modern leaders and generals would do well to look to the past to learn how a general should be expected to behave. Herbert points out that if placed in the same situation, "generals of the most recent wars" would "whine on their knees before posterity" to create a legacy they have not earned. Rather than accept their failings, these leaders "accuse their subordinates," their "envious colleagues," and the "unfavourable winds," all of which derailed their victories.

The words from line 22 are especially ironic. Thucydides might, indeed, have blamed the winds or the gods, as was the custom in Athenian society. Thus Herbert's choice to include this reference to "unfavourable winds" is especially ironic and on two levels. On the first level, modern generals rely upon satellites, computers, and especially wartime intelligence derived from spies, who are far more sophisticated than those employed by the Greeks during the fourth century b.c.e. Fate, or "unfavourable winds," is of little consequence in modern warfare. On the second level is the more humorous meaning in "unfavourable winds," which implies more than just air or the movement of air; it also implies gaseous air, the more foul-smelling air of betrayal. Herbert felt very strongly that classical literature could be used as a way to understand the events of the modern world. Sometimes the use of ironic language can aid in that understanding by pointing out the ridiculousness of someone's actions□in this case, the actions of modern leaders and generals who are incapable of accepting responsibility for their mistakes.

Style

Classicism

In poetry, the term classicism means a reliance on traditional forms to produce poetry in which the meaning is clear and in which there is a parallelism of thought. Classicism might also include an adherence to the rules and values of ancient poets and writers. In Herbert's poem, these aesthetic ideals are revealed in several ways. There is a parallelism between the comparisons drawn between Thucydides and recent generals. In addition, Herbert's poetry is very clean, the meaning easy to derive. The most confusing element, in fact, is in the last section that refers to modern poets. Since Herbert is extolling the virtues of the classic ideal within his poem, his use of confusing language when discussing modern poets, whose topics are as meaningless as their poetry, becomes an example of the value of classicism. Finally, Herbert uses ancient Athenian events and personages as a way to establish classical Greek society's value in a modern world.

Imagery

Imagery refers to the images in a poem. The relationships between images can suggest important meanings in a poem, and with imagery the poet uses language and specific words to create meaning. For instance, Herbert includes images from Thucydides's wartime experiences. These images of "battles sieges plague" serve to create specific ideas about the general. He has been tested in war, and he has survived. When called upon to accept responsibility for loss, he has done so, and he has accepted the punishment received□exile from his native home. The contrasting images that Herbert offers are of the generals of recent wars. Herbert says that these men "whine on their knees," a striking image of cowardice. These men would not take responsibility for their losses; instead they would blame others for their own faults. The use of such words as "accuse," "envious," and "unfavourable" help to create clear images of Herbert's meaning.

Line Breaks

Line breaks are a defining element of poetry. They are one characteristic that is used to create meaning or to direct emphasis on an idea, to create a rhyme or rhythm, or to create a specific appearance on the page. Herbert uses line breaks to create meaning and to emphasize ideas. Abrupt lines, such as line 25□"it was winter"□create an image of hardship, and yet the simplicity of the line also makes clear that Thucydides did not make excuses for his failure to save his city. Herbert also uses the line break to create tension in lines 7 and 8. For instance, "the episode is like a pin" leaves the reader waiting for the conclusion of the metaphor "in a forest," which makes clear that Thucydides's failing is insignificant when considered in the context of his many victories.

Placing the conclusion of the metaphor on the next line helps to sustain tension in the poem.

Lyrical Poetry

Lyric poetry describes poems that are strongly associated with emotion, imagination, and a song-like resonance, especially when associated with an individual speaker or speakers. Lyrical poetry emerged during the Archaic Age. These poems were shorter than the previous narrative poetry of Homer or the didactic poetry of Hesiod. Since lyric poetry is so very individual and emotional in its content, it is by its very nature also subjective. Since Herbert admired the early Greeks so much, it is understandable that he would also use a poetic form that originates with the Greeks. Lyrical poetry is also the most common form of poetry, especially since its attributes are also common to many other forms of poetry. Herbert's poem combines many of the attributes of lyrical poetry, with its emphasis on honor and bravery and perseverance and the concerns of the individual as a member of a society.

Motif

A motif is the central image that recurs throughout a poem. The motif can be a theme, a particular character or image, or even a metaphor or analogy that is the basis of the poem's narrative. In Herbert's poem, the central motif is that classical literature can be an important means to understand the events of today. Specifically, Herbert argues that an ancient Greek general and historian like Thucydides is an honorable model for modern generals and leaders and even poets, whose work is without honor or lasting legacy.

Poetic Form

The word "poem" is generally assigned to mean a literary composition distinguished by emotion, imagination, and meaning. But the term *poem* may also fit certain designated formulas, such as a sonnet or a couplet, which are defined by length and or a rhyme scheme. A poem may also include divisions into stanzas, a sort of paragraph-like division of ideas, and may also include a specific number of stressed or unstressed syllables in each line. Herbert's poem does not make use of a set number of syllables per line and does not employ specific defining characteristics, as does a sonnet; however, his poem does meet many of the other elements that define poetry, especially the notion of compactness and concreteness of language. Every word in Herbert's poem suggests an image or idea, and nothing is wasted. Modern poetry has moved from the strict formulas of the early poets, but even the contemporary poet still strives for an impassioned response to his or her poem. And like the earliest poetry, modern poetry is still highly individualistic.

Historical Context

Postwar Communism

Herbert was well known for his opposition to communist rule, and since there is no absolute date for the composition of "Why the Classics," one place to begin a study of the historical events that might have influenced Herbert is with communism in Poland following World War II. Initially, Poles welcomed the Red Army when they entered in 1944 and liberated the country from the Nazis, but the welcome turned bitter when Polish women were raped and their towns were looted by drunken soldiers. When the German massacre of Warsaw occurred during the summer of 1944, the Soviets failed to help, even though their army was just outside the city. The thousands of Polish lives that were lost were of no consequence to the Soviets. The Polish Home Army, the resistance movement that Herbert helped to found, was almost completely obliterated in the massacre in Warsaw. At war's end there was very little of Warsaw remaining. Effort needed to be put into rebuilding the city, which was nearly abandoned, depleting much of the people's spirit for actively resisting communism.

Herbert was living in Krakow in the closing days of World War II, and the population of Krakow was particularly defiant in the face of communist rule. The city had a strong Roman Catholic-based population and had become a center for intellectuals, who did not readily accept Soviet rule. The deportation of Krakow's young men to Soviet work camps further angered the population. Food was scarce, wages were low, and health care was poor. During the years immediately following the end of the war, Herbert witnessed active resistance and open defiance to the communists, but within two years of the occupation, the Poles in Krakow began to accept the inevitability of communist rule. This was something that Herbert could not tolerate, and he continued to protest long after other voices of protest had silenced. Because of the tight control of publishing, Herbert paid for his opposition through the suppression of his writing. When one considers how easily and quickly Poland first succumbed to the Nazis and then later to the Soviets and how the Red Army occupation led to so much violence, it is little wonder that Herbert held modern generals and leaders in such contempt.

Living in Warsaw

By the late 1940s, Herbert had moved to Warsaw, a city that lay in ruins after the Nazi occupation during the war. More than 90 percent of Warsaw was destroyed during the war, and initially, there was a plan to just abandon the city and let it lay in ruins. People lived in the ruins and tried to patch things as best they could. Soon however, and in the immediate postwar years, many Poles left the countryside and moved to Warsaw, and the city was eventually rebuilt upon the ruins of the old city. The result was that areas of the new city were elevated by several feet, since in many cases old buildings were just leveled, and their debris was not carted off to other sites but became a foundation for new buildings. The communists looked to build functional buildings and were not

interested in aesthetics. The new buildings were often drab, modern constructions, and streets were renamed to honor communist ideals. The communist government, located in the Soviet Union, cared little for Polish history or culture and there was little effort to restore the beauty of Warsaw. Poland became a satellite nation of the Soviets, with little sensitivity for the Polish people. There was little free enterprise and a corresponding drop in the standard of living. Even though the government tried to control any attempts at free thought and expression of ideas, Warsaw did manage to become a center of culture and education.

This oppression began to lift in 1956 after Stalinism was officially condemned in the Soviet Union and the official Soviet regime that had been governing Poland was replaced by a new Communist leadership who made efforts to separate Poland from the Soviet Union. Many political prisoners were granted amnesty and the restrictions on publication of art and literature were eased. For Herbert, these changes meant that he could finally publish his first collection of poetry. It is worth noting, however, that in 1968 this same government brutally suppressed student demonstrations calling for democracy, the end of censorship, and an end to government sanctioned anti-Semitism. Herbert could not have failed to note Poland's long and difficult journey to freedom, which would take many more years. "Why the Classics," was published in 1968, the year that the government began to use violent oppression to maintain control. Herbert had witnessed similar events many times since 1939 and had significant experience with political and military suppression of the people.

Critical Overview

In the introduction to Herbert's *Selected Poems*, in which "Why the Classics" was published in 1968, Al Alvarez states that Herbert is an exception to the notion that there is a split between poetry and politics. Alvarez explains that generally the language of modern poetry does not go with the language of modern politics. Poetry, according to Alvarez, is filled with complexities and tension, while politics is rhetoric and clichés. Most often modern political poetry can be effective, but it is not good poetry. However, Alvarez finds that Herbert is "an *avant-garde* poet whose experiments and precise, restrained rhythms have sent Polish prosody off in a new direction." According to Alvarez, Herbert's use of classicism is a way of coping with an out-of-control world, a "minority politics of sanity and survival," that maintains the political opposition to which he has assigned himself a role. These same attributes were also noted when Herbert was awarded the Jerusalem Prize in May 1991. In an article printed in the *Jerusalem Post*, a staff reporter noted that the prize jury "cited Herbert's poems as expressing the struggle for freedom and individuality 'in all circumstances and against all odds' through an unusual combination of sophistication and honesty." In receiving this award, Herbert joined several other illustrious recipients, including writers Jorge Luis Borges, Graham Greene, and Simone de Beauvoir.

One way to judge a poet's importance in the world of literature is through the obituaries printed after his death. Herbert's passing was the occasion of several prominent obituaries, one written by poet and literary critic, Adam Czerniawski for *The Independent* in London. Of Herbert's use of the classics, Czerniawski writes that "Herbert uses the heritage of Western history, culture and religion in a dynamic, dialectical way. He demonstrates that the past can illuminate the present, and that in the process the past can also be reinterpreted." Czerniawski also observes that Herbert, more so than any other notable poet of his country, "is more closely identified with the ideological conflicts of the Cold War." These words of tribute are easily identified in Herbert's poem "Why the Classics," with its model of honor derived from classical antiquity and the poet's concerns with the duty of the poet to create poems that have social and cultural importance. Like Thucydides, Herbert succeeded in creating a lasting legacy through his words. In an obituary written for *The Guardian*, Neil Bowdler writes that "Herbert was recognized by critics as one of Poland's four great post-war poets." Two of the four poets, Czeslaw Milosz and Wislawa Szymborska, were Nobel laureates and thus Herbert's importance in the canon of Polish poetry cannot be diminished with time.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Metzger has a doctorate in English Renaissance literature. She teaches literature and drama at the University of New Mexico, where she is a lecturer in the University Honors Program. In this essay, Metzger discusses Herbert's use of classical history in his poem and the way in which the poet uses Greek history to teach modern lessons for both poets and generals about personal honor, social responsibility, and the importance of truth in poetry.

It would be nearly impossible, and no doubt a pointless exercise, to try and separate Herbert's poem "Why the Classics" from the historical, cultural, and social events of the author's life. Herbert's experiences during several invasions, a major war, and the communist takeover of Poland have permeated much of his poetry, and "Why the Classics" is no exception. Historians estimate that more than 50 million people died during World War II, and the number of post—World War II victims to communist oppression has never been accurately calculated. Such massive numbers are overwhelming, so how then can a poet even make sense of such needless slaughter? Just as important, mankind must wonder how human beings could have permitted and in some cases even encouraged such carnage. Within the brevity of thirty-four lines, Herbert attempts to make ancient history relevant in a post-war world where destruction and death have so recently occurred on such a massive scale. Instead of merely accepting the inevitability of poor leadership and government that he has witnessed, Herbert's poem presents an answer to the question posed by the verse's title about why the classics still have a place after so much destruction and death have encompassed the world. Through the ancient example provided by Thucydides, Herbert suggests an ancient historical model of personal honor, veracity, and nobility that the poet finds lacking in leaders of the modern world.

In a 1987 essay, "Zbigniew Herbert, the Poet as Witness," critic and Herbert translator Bogdana Carpenter states that events during the ten years prior to the end of communism in Poland served to create a sense of social obligation on behalf of Herbert to serve as witness to the truth of what was happening under such a repressive and destructive regime. Carpenter suggests that this obligation became particularly crucial during the period when martial law was imposed in those final years under communist rule, and that any writer would become "not only an artist but also a witness" to these events. According to Carpenter, Herbert used his poetry as a way to provide testimony. In one sense, his work becomes a historical record of injustice and oppression. While Carpenter's comments are certainly an accurate reflection of the influence of communist rule on Herbert's poetry, it is equally clear from the Herbert poem under consideration that the poet felt a strong sense of obligation long before the events of the late 1970s and 1980s occurred. One way to consider the sense of importance that Herbert felt during the postwar years is to consider his use of Thucydides as the model of honor and repute on whom Herbert rests his poem's main premise. Herbert begins "Why the Classics" with two important lines: "in the fourth book of the Peloponnesian War / Thucydides tells among other things." These opening lines establish that Thucydides is also a writer, that he was recording history, and that the events that Herbert focuses

upon were only a few "among other things." And thus Thucydides was also a witness who felt compelled to be honest and completely forthright about his own failings. He is a model for all who would give testimony to the truth of what they have witnessed.

Carpenter suggests that the lack of media freedom under which Herbert lived and wrote and the restriction of all communication to official communist doctrine created "a new function [for the poet] to fulfill, a function that is normally reserved for history and the media□to provide information, and to give an undistorted account of a situation or of events." Herbert confirms this new function in "Why the Classics" when he relates in lines 23 through 26 that Thucydides provided an undistorted account of his own battle experiences in the failure to save his native city if Amphipolis. Herbert writes that "Thucydides says only / that he had seven ships / it was winter / and he sailed quickly." There is no embellishment of facts, no effort to put forth excuses, and no official regime reinterpreting contemporary events; there are only the brief historical facts of the unfettered historian who has failed in his mission. Herbert compares Thucydides's brief words and his unwillingness to excuse or embellish the events with modern generals and leaders who "whine on their knees before posterity." The "posterity," of course, is the historical record, which in Poland has frustrated Herbert with its failure to report the truth. Rather than admit to mistakes, Herbert observes that recent generals "accuse their subordinates." They accuse "envious colleagues" who must be contained if deficient generals are to continue in their leadership role. These modern generals even accuse "unfavourable winds" for having thwarted their successes. What these contemporary leaders fail to do is what Thucydides so willingly chose to do□report the truth.

Herbert does not see the ancient world as irrelevant to the present. In a 1980 essay, "Zbigniew Herbert and the Imperfect Poem," John and Bogdana Carpenter offer some insight into Herbert's thoughts about the importance of history and how it might be used to guide modern generals. The Carpenters write that "For Herbert, history is a continuum, a web with an infinite number of seams leading into other seams." One way that this idea is exemplified is in Herbert's use of General Thucydides. It does not matter to Herbert that his model lived nearly 2500 years ago; instead, what matters is the importance of Thucydides's behavior under the pressure of war. Thucydides is honorable in accepting responsibility for his losses in battle, something that Herbert sees as seriously lacking in modern generals. The Carpenters point out that Herbert's use of classical history demonstrates that "the living and the dead form the same mortal, human community." The Carpenters also note that this "'living' presence of the dead" adds "a remarkable degree of generality and breadth" to Herbert's poems. His poems have applicability for all audiences, across all time. For Herbert, the events of the Peloponnesian War and the behavior of Thucydides are part of the continuum of history that can guide modern generals. This merging of time adds a tension to "Why the Classics" that would be missing if Herbert simply delivered his ideas as a lecture-like poem on the failings of modern generals. Instead, Herbert reaches back in time for an indisputable model of honor who can serve as a paradigm of integrity for those who most need a lesson in nobility. At the same time, Thucydides's story offers more than a simple lesson. As the Carpenter team note, "the fact that we are alive does not make us superior to the dead in any way." In fact, Herbert's poem suggests the alive are very

much inferior. It is this opposition between the classical ideal and the failings of a modern world that Herbert captures so clearly in his poem.

Herbert does offer a solution for modern man's failings, and the answers lie with each individual within the memories of ancient stories and history of those who have lived before. There is no evidence that Herbert ever met Joseph Campbell (1904—1987) or that the poet was influenced in any way by Campbell's writings on heroes and myth, and yet Herbert's use of Greek classicism shares some commonalities with Campbell's ideas about the role of classical stories and myth in modern lives. Campbell, who is well known as a writer on mythology and comparative religions, lived during much of the same period as Herbert. Campbell is often considered to be an authority on the history and importance of myth and, in particular, on the role of ancient stories and myths in modern life. Like Herbert, Campbell thought that modern men could look into the past to find answers to the present, and like Herbert, Campbell believed in the temporal convergence of past and present.

In "First Storytellers," part of an extended interview with journalist Bill Moyers, Campbell links the ancient stories and myths to modern life. Because so many of the early stories are about death, war, growing old, and finding mankind's place in a social order, myths help men respond to the uncertainties of life and to the realities of life. Campbell says that the past is a part of living, that "the nerves in our body carry the memories that shaped the organization of our nervous system to certain environmental circumstances and to the demands of the organism." The past cannot be separated from the present. In other words, mankind can find the answers to modern problems by searching the past, which is encoded within each person. Herbert's merging of past and present is especially notable in lines 14 and 15, in which the poet writes, "exiles of all times / know what price that is." The choice of two words, "all times," links past and present, and the use of "know" makes clear that this is knowledge that is within, not knowledge that is taught. This knowing is the convergence of all times, from the wars of classical Greece and even earlier to the modern time of contemporary wars and oppression.

This merging of past and present works in Herbert's "Why the Classics" in the weaving of time between past and present. The first thirteen lines of the poem focus on Thucydides and the past. Then the next two lines, with the words "of all times," serve as a bridge to the present. With the following seven lines, Herbert takes his reader into the present before returning to the past for another four lines. Then in the final eight lines of the poem, the reader is once again transported into the present. The reader is constantly moving in time and is forced to recognize that past and present have become one entity. Bogdana Carpenter, who has devoted significant time to the study of Herbert and his poetry, argued in a 1983 essay, "The Barbarian and the Garden: Zbigniew Herbert's Reevaluations," that Herbert's attitude toward the past is not passive. He uses the past to recreate the present, and yet, Herbert never makes the poem more important than history. Art is never more important than integrity. Just as Thucydides suffered exile for the truth, Herbert was willing to suffer for the truth.

In the final eight lines of the poem, Herbert links the responsibility of ancient and modern generals to the obligations of the artist. Herbert finds no great legacy in "lovers'

weeping / in a small dirty hotel / when wall-paper dawns." This is not the truth; it is the "self-pity" that infuses many modern poets. There is no glory in suffering and there is nothing to be learned. As Carpenter notes, there is "only a sober determination not to avert the eyes" for the poet. Herbert cared about injustice and about human rights. His own work went unpublished because he could not ignore the injustices that he witnessed through invasions and war. Herbert, declares Carpenter, is a poet who functions as witness, who feels "his duty is to give testimony," to speak for those who have suffered and to be as honest as Thucydides, who also suffered for truth. For Herbert, according to Carpenter, "poetry must be subordinate to truth, and truth is faithful to reality." Herbert's poetry does not let history hide under excuses or fate. For him, Thucydides's experiences in the past are infused into the experiences of those writers who live in the present and who find their duty in bearing witness to the truth.

In her 1983 essay, Carpenter states that Herbert takes an active approach to art and the past. Rather than simply appreciating the past, Herbert demands "an effort of re-creation" that makes the past the present. Rather than be isolated from history, as Poland was under communist control, Herbert remains open to the past, which is always a part of the present. In "Why the Classics," Herbert succeeds in bringing an ancient historical figure to life. Thucydides is more real than the modern generals of the poem, who remain only vague caricatures of what they should be. Had these generals only looked inward to find the past, they might have avoided the failures of the present. By the end of the poem, the reader sympathizes with this long-ago historian who suffered so much for his honesty. Herbert succeeds in making the past the present, and the reader is the better informed for his having done so.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, Critical Essay on "Why the Classics," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Even under communist rule, the Roman Catholic Church continued as an important force in Poland. Research the role that the church played in the years between 1944—1989, and describe some of the ways in which the church maintained such an important presence in the country.

Solidarity was a national confederation of trade union led by Lech Walesa. Investigate the role that Walesa and Solidarity had on the end of communist rule. In what ways did labor unions challenge communism?

Mahatma Gandhi argued that civil disobedience and non-violent protests were an effective way to create social change. In Poland, the Roman Catholic Church used non-violent means to help rid Poland of the communist regime. Find other examples of how non-violent protests have changed government doctrine or even toppled a harsh regime.

Under communist rule, women had a great deal of equality, primarily because they were considered valuable labor. The communists also had models for feminine behavior with regard to the raising of children and a woman's role within the family. Investigate how women's lives changed after communism ended in Poland. Was there more equality? Or less?

Traditionally, art and theatre have been the primary media for protest in an oppressive government. Herbert was unable to publish his first book of poems until after restrictions were eased in 1956, but, previously, writers had long been considered important national treasures, and many streets were named after Adam Mickiewicz, a nineteenth-century poet in the Romantic tradition. Locate some examples of poetry written by Mickiewicz and Herbert and compare the two poets for similarities and differences. Try to compare two or three poems by each author. In what ways are the events of each poet's life reflected in his work?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: The Warsaw Pact is signed binding the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, including Poland, together in a military alliance. The member countries include Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, German Democratic Republic (East Germany), Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union. This alliance allows the Russian Red Army to maintain a presence in each country and is meant to parallel the NATO alliances formed at the conclusion of World War II.

Today: Although the Warsaw Pact is officially renewed in 1985, it has begun to dissolve. In 1968, Albania is the first country to leave. Over the next twenty-five years, several other countries also choose to leave the alliance, and, in July 1991, the Warsaw Pact is officially dissolved. In 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland join NATO. In 2004, Bulgaria, Romania, and several separate member states of the former Soviet Union also join NATO.

1950s: Nikita Khrushchev condemns Joseph Stalin, and in response, the old Polish-Soviet regime is deposed and a new less rigid communist regime is installed. This results in the easing of censorship and publishing restrictions.

Today: By 1968, the new communist regime in Poland proves itself to be equally oppressive as the old government, but, eventually, communism ends in Poland. Today, there are far fewer countries under communist rule than in the years immediately following the end of World War II when communism is seen as a threat that may engulf many more countries. Communism is still a controlling force in China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam.

1950s: *Mother of Kings*, a novel about the dangers of communism, is published in Poland by Kazimierz Brandys. The publication of this novel reflects the easing of censorship restrictions under the more relaxed communist rule. It is made into a film in 1982 but is not shown until 1987 when communism is close to an end in Poland.

Today: It can be difficult to comprehend living in a country where censorship restricts the publication of materials that are considered inflammatory, controversial, or provocative in any way. Officially, state censorship in Poland ends in 1990, and, within two years, nearly 1,000 periodicals are being published, including more than 200 newspapers. However, censorship is not completely gone from Poland. For example, state censorship occurs in March 2003 when the government attempts to stop a journalistic probe of corruption in state run radio broadcasts.

What Do I Read Next?

Barbarians in the Garden, published in English in 1986, is a collection of Herbert's essays and serves as a record of his travels through much of Europe. Many of the essays focus on art and architecture.

Herbert's *Report from the Besieged City*, published in English in 1986, uses poetry to illuminate life in a city under invasion. Other poems offer reflections on composers like Beethoven and Schubert.

Postwar Polish Poetry (1984), edited by Czeslaw Milosz, is an anthology that contains Milosz's translations of poetry by twenty-one major Polish poets.

Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule (1992), edited by Wislawa Szymborska and Clare Cavanagh, is an anthology of more than twenty-nine poets whose works were written in the 1970s and 1980s, as Poland was emerging from communism.

Five Centuries of Polish Poetry, 1450—1970 (1979), edited by Jerzy Pietrkiewicz, is an anthology that traces Polish literary history over the past 500 years.

Nobel laureate Wislawa Szymborska's *Poems New and Collected* (1998) is a collection of the poet's older poems as well as sixty-four newly translated poems.

A Book of Luminous Things (1998), by Czeslaw Milosz, is a collection of clear, easy to read and understand poetry that should appeal to lay-level readers.

Further Study

Aulich, James, and Marta Sylvestrova, *Political Posters in Central and Eastern Europe 1946—1995: Signs of the Times*, Manchester University Press, 2000.

This book is an illustrated history of the political poster in the post—World War II era and during communist rule. Political posters were a closely monitored and often discredited means of expression. The reproductions of posters contained within this book offer an interesting glimpse into political ideology as expressed in an art form that was readily available to the people.

Cipkowski, Peter, *Revolution in Eastern Europe*, John Wiley & Sons, 1991.

This book provides a detailed examination of the events of 1989 that brought about the end of communism in Eastern Europe. The book also provides a history of communism in Poland from 1945 until 1989 and includes lots of background information to help readers understand these events more thoroughly.

Czerniawski, Adam, *The Mature Laurel: Essays on Modern Polish Poetry*, Seren Books, 1991.

This book is a collection of essays that features the work of many different poets. The poets discussed are not the Romantic poets of Poland's past, and the subjects discussed are often the turmoil of war and politics. This book makes a good effort to introduce readers to the variety and depth of modern Polish poetry.

Drakulic, Slavenka, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, Perennial, 1993.

This book is a collection of essays about ordinary life in Eastern Europe during the communist regimes. The essays focus on a woman's perspective and how the failure of communism was more than ideological but also practical, from a failure to manufacture decent toilet paper to a failure to provide tampons. This book illustrates that humor can also be an important way to assess political failures.

Kraszewski, Charles S., *Essays on the Dramatic Works of Polish Poet Zbigniew Herbert*, Edwin Mellen Press, 2002.

Rather than focusing on Herbert's poetry, this writer chooses to examine Herbert's dramatic works, especially his five plays. Kraszewski also includes a discussion of Herbert's other works that have been adapted to the stage.

Shallcross, Bozena, ed., *The Other Herbert*, Indiana Slavic Studies series, No. 9, Indiana University Press, 1998.

This book is a collection of essays written by literary critics who examine Herbert's plays, essays, and legacy. The purpose of this collection is to examine Herbert's work

exclusive of his poetry, for which he was best known. This volume of essays helps to establish Herbert as a multi-talented writer who was not restricted to one genre.

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Campbell, Joseph, with Bill Moyers, "The First Storytellers," in *The Power of Myth*, Anchor Books, 1988, pp. 86—112.

Carpenter, Bogdana, "The Barbarian and the Garden: Zbigniew Herbert's Reevaluations," in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 57, No. 3, Summer 1983, pp. 388—93.

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"Polish Poet Gets Jerusalem Prize," in the *Jerusalem Post*, May 2, 1991, p. 10.