

HISTORICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL

English for Degree Entrance (EDE) compiled by Carrie Molinski & Sue Slessor.

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Introduction

Literature is an art form often expressing the ideas, influences and historical times of the authors who produce it. The environment and experiences of an author inform and affect the images, themes and form of the messages and images. In this chapter, you will review various forms of literature, poems, songs and plays in order to understand how an author's work reflects a unique perspectives, culture and history.

Learning Objectives

- Examine a variety of literary works to build an understanding of society.
- Explain how elements, features, and form of literary texts convey meaning.
- Analyze literature using a historical or biographical literary lens.

To Do List

- Read the content on historical/biographical lens.
- Read the biographies and poems by Shakespeare, Etheridge Knight, and A Tribe Called Red.
- Complete the learning activities for the authors.
- Complete the historical/biographical lens assignment in Blackboard.

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HISTORICAL OR BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICAL LENS

Author-Based/Historical Criticism

Though generally author-based and historical criticism are seen as two different categories, for the purpose of simplicity, we are going to combine them together in this text. An author-based/historical critical lens is focused on uncovering the person of the author in a text. Since this text focuses on discovering the voices of women through history, this approach can be very useful in helping us to get to know the women behind the texts we read.

When looking through this ‘lens,’ our goal is to find out as much as possible about the author and their life and context. We might read a biography on the author or read about the time in history in which they lived. Learning about the author’s life and where and when they lived can tell us a lot about a text, and vice versa.

For example, many students have trouble with Emily Dickinson’s poems. They don’t seem to make sense with their strange punctuation and fixation on death. But, as we investigate her life, we find that she didn’t intend for her poetry to ever be read. In fact, her poems are like a journal that she kept of her thoughts and experiences. Further, discovering that she lived close to the front lines of the Civil War helps us to make sense of her preoccupation with death.

Here’s a video on Historical Criticism. The speaker in this video takes a similar approach to what’s described here:

Watch It: What is Historical Criticism

Watch What is historical criticism (4:30 minutes) on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/SMxkN81OhKw>)

What to look for:

When studying a text through an author-based or historical lens, think of the journalistic questions:

1. **Who?** Who is/was the author? Who is their family? What are the author's core values/beliefs?
2. **What?** What is the text about? How does that topic connect with the author's experiences or the author's historical context?
3. **When?** When did the author live? What significant events happened? What was life like? How is the time period significant?
4. **Where?** Where did the author live? How is that location significant?
5. **Why?** Why did the author write? Do we know? Was the work in response to something that happened in the author's life or in history?

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this chapter is adapted from “Reading Through a Critical Lens (<https://sayhername.pressbooks.com/chapter/reading-through-a-critical-lens/>)” In *Say Her Name: Discovering Women's Voices in History* (<https://pressbooks.pub/sayhername>) by Dr. Karen Palmer, licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). /Adaptations include removal of content referring to Feminist theory including text and videos.

THE SONNETS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Introduction

William Shakespeare began to write his famous collection of sonnets in the early 1590's, when he was in his late 20's.

He was mainly a playwright, of course, but outbreaks of a horrific and highly contagious disease, known as the bubonic plague, occasionally forced the theatres to close, and it may have been one such epidemic which forced Shakespeare to take a reprieve from playwriting and turn to poetry instead. There was also a vogue for sonnet writing in the latter half of the sixteenth century, another reason which likely motivated him. And he had found the love interest upon which his sonnet collection would focus.

The sonnets tell a story of a young writer who forms a deep friendship with a young man, apparently of noble birth. The poet praises his dear friend's beauty and intelligence and urges him, possibly at instigation of his friend's mother, to marry and raise a family. Such rare beauty and intelligence must be passed along; you owe it to the world, the poet argues.

As time goes by, the poet seems to realize that his advice is misplaced because a wife and family would threaten the amount of time his friend could spend with him. He turns his attention away from recommending his friend marry and raise a family and more toward expressions of praise for his friend's beauty, grace, intelligence, generosity and charm. He resolves to immortalize his friends' many virtues, a resolution he certainly fulfilled.

But paradise always has its troubles, and trouble comes in the form of a rival poet who turns the friend's head and secures the patronage Shakespeare now must share. Suddenly Shakespeare is worried about his place in his friend's universe, and he pours out his anguish and insecurity, convinced of his own inferiority in this new chapter in the story.

The influence of the rival poet fades and passes, but another crisis arises. The poet has fallen for a beautiful dark-haired woman and expresses his love and, more so, his desire for her. He is insecure in this relationship. The Dark Lady is something of a free spirit. He suspects that his dear friend and his Dark Lady are cheating on him. He is devastated.

The crisis is not resolved. The story ends inconclusively, the poet unable to resist the Dark Lady's charms, even while he suspects her of infidelity.

The real-life identities of the characters in the Sonnets are the great mystery of English literary history. Who is the handsome noble friend? There are intriguing clues. When the Sonnets were published in 1609, possibly without the poet's permission, the title page announced "the only begetter" of the sonnets as one W.H. Scholars who define "begetter" as "author" ("beget" meaning "to bring about/to bring into existence")

believe the printer simply mistook the H for an S or omitted the S before the H, which would have established the “begetter” clearly as W. SH. (i.e., **W**illiam **S**hakespeare).

Scholars who define “begetter” as “muse” (a person who serves as inspiration for an artist) suggest W.H. refers to the handsome young nobleman who inspired the poems. Shakespeare knew well two such men. Both were generous patrons of poets and playwrights. One was Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton; the other was William Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke. Southampton’s age and physical appearance match the contents of some of the sonnets, but his initials are reversed on the title page, possibly by error, possibly as an attempt to conceal his true identity. Pembroke’s initials are correct, but he was only twelve when the sonnets were written, inappropriately young to be the muse of a thirty-year-old man. The debate continues, with other even less likely identities suggested, but it will probably never be resolved.

Nor can the identity of the other major characters in the story be established with any certainty. The rival poet may be one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries: Christopher Marlow, George Chapman or Samuel Daniel. The Dark Lady may be Amelia Lanier, the daughter of Queen Elizabeth’s musical director, though this recent [essay on Lanier \[New Tab\]](https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/an-introduction-to-the-poetry-of-amelia-lanier) (<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/an-introduction-to-the-poetry-of-amelia-lanier>) leads away from the thesis that she was the origin of Shakespeare’s Dark Lady.

All of the main characters may be fictitious, products of Shakespeare’s magnificent imagination. In the end, it makes little difference to the integrity of Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence, one of the crowning achievements of English literature.

Sonnets

Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer’s lease hath all too short a date:
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimm’d;
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,¹
 By chance, or nature’s changing course, untrimm’d;
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st;²

1. Everything that is beautiful—“fair”—declines with time.

2. That beauty you own.

Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
 When in eternal lines³ to time thou grow'st;
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee (Shakespeare, n.d. as cited in Poetry Foundation n.d.a).

Sonnet 97

How like a winter hath my absence been
 From thee,⁴ the pleasure of the fleeting year!
 What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!
 What old December's bareness every where!
 And yet this time remov'd was summer's time,
 The teeming autumn, big with rich increase,
 Bearing the wanton burden of the prime,
 Like widow'd wombs after their lord's decease:⁵
 Yet this abundant issue seem'd to me
 But hope of orphans and unfather'd fruit;⁶
 For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
 And, thou away, the very birds are mute;
 Or, if they sing, 'tis with so dull a cheer
 That leaves look pale, dreading the winter's near (Shakespeare, n.d. as cited in Poetry Foundation n.d.b).

Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;

3. The wrinkles on your face; also the lines of this sonnet

4. The Earl of Southampton was imprisoned in 1601 for his support of the Essex Rebellion against Queen Elizabeth I. Some Shakespeare biographers cite this fact as evidence that the special friend is Henry Wriothesley.

5. As if a widow had become pregnant after her husband had died. The poet stresses his point that richness of autumn is muted because his friend is away.

6. He reiterates the point of lines 7–8. Autumn is the season of abundance but it is diminished for the poet because his friend is not around.

And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;
 My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare (Shakespeare, n.d. as cited in Poetry Foundation n.d.c).

Sonnet 144

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
 Which like two spirits do suggest⁷ me still:
 The better angel is a man right fair,
 The worser spirit a woman colour'd ill.
 To win me soon to hell, my female evil
 Tempteth my better angel from my side,
 And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
 Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
 And whether that my angel be turn'd fiend
 Suspect I may, but not directly tell;
 But being both from me⁸, both to each friend,
 I guess one angel in another's hell:
 Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
 Till my bad angel fire my good one out (Shakespeare, n.d. as cited in Poetry Foundation n.d.d).

7. Sonnet 144. Seek to influence. "Still" Always.

8. Away from me.

2.

Learning Activity

1. Shakespeare was influenced by the time in which he lived, the people in his life and the specific environment of London in the 1590s. Based on the sonnets and your knowledge of other works of Shakespeare, is this literature still relevant to today's society? Do the messages and themes depicted here about unrequited and young love still resonate with a modern audience or are there better forms available?

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this section is adapted from “[25 An Anthology of Poems for Further Study \(https://opentextbc.ca/provincialenglish/chapter/poem-anthology/\)](https://opentextbc.ca/provincialenglish/chapter/poem-anthology/)” In *Composition and Literature* by James Sexton and Derek Soles, licensed under [CC BY 4.0.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) / Extracted just the Shakespeare section from the original OER. Removal of several sonnets and changing the accompanying activity.

References

Poetry Foundation (n.d.a). *Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? by William Shakespeare.*

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45087/sonnet-18-shall-i-compare-thee-to-a-summers-day>

Poetry Foundation (n.d.b). *Sonnet 97: How like a winter hath my absence been by William Shakespeare.*

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45101/sonnet-97-how-like-a-winter-hath-my-absence-been>

Poetry Foundation (n.d.c). *Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun by William Shakespeare.*

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45108/sonnet-130-my-mistress-eyes-are-nothing-like-the-sun>

Poetry Foundation (n.d.d). *Sonnet 144: Two loves I have of comfort and despair by William Shakespeare.*

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50651/sonnet-144-two-loves-i-have-of-comfort-and-despair>

"EASTERN GUARD TOWER" BY ETHERIDGE KNIGHT (HAIKU)

Biography

Etheridge Knight was born on April 19, 1931, in Corinth, Mississippi. His father was a farmer and, later, a construction worker on the Kentucky Dam. Knight's childhood was unsettled. He was an excellent student, but opportunities for poor black children in the South were few. He dropped out of school when he was sixteen. He joined the army and served as a medical technician in the Korean War until November 1950. He was wounded and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, conditions which led to an addiction to painkillers, morphine especially.

He settled in Indianapolis, where his family was now living. Opportunities were still few, and Knight sold drugs to support his own addiction. In 1960, he was sentenced to eight years in prison for armed robbery. In prison, Knight read widely and began to write poetry. By the mid 1960s, he was gaining a reputation—especially among other African-American poets—as a gifted writer. *Poems from Prison* was published in 1968, the same year Knight was released.

Upon his release, Knight married fellow poet Sonia Sanchez. They were, with Dudley Randall, Amiri Baraka, and Gwendolyn Brooks, prominent in the Black Arts Movement. BAM was a more radical successor to the Harlem Renaissance. By the 1960s, African-American writers and artists were impatient with the slow march toward civil rights and their work took a more aggressive, radical, assertive position on the need for social change, for the end to racism, especially.

Knight struggled to control his drug addiction; his marriage to Sanchez did not survive. But his career flourished. He found work as poet-in-residence at several universities, including the University of Pittsburgh. He was the recipient of prestigious grants, including a Guggenheim. He continued to publish poetry collections: *Belly Song and Other Poems*, in 1973; *Born of a Woman*, in 1980. His work was widely acclaimed, and he was nominated for prestigious awards, including a Pulitzer Prize.

Knight got some control over his drug addiction, earned a degree in American poetry and married again, though he and his second wife separated in 1977. He died of lung cancer in March of 1991.

Eastern Guard Tower

Published 1968

“Eastern guard tower
glints in sunset; convicts rest
like lizards on rocks.” (Knight, n.d. as cited in Poetry Foundation, n.d., Lines 1-3).
by Etheridge Knight

Analysis

Theme

As is usually the case for a haiku, theme emerges from the contrast embedded in the poem’s imagery. The guard tower “glints in sunset,” the tower suggesting the beauty and freedom that lies beyond it. The convicts, resting “like lizards on rocks,” suggests the pain and resentment of incarceration, of the loss of freedom.

Form

“Eastern Guard Tower” is a haiku. The haiku is a form of free verse that originated in Japan and, though it is a free verse form, does have its conventions. It is three lines in length. In its strict, classical form, the three lines add up to seventeen syllables: five in the first line, seven in the second, and five again in the third. Knight’s haiku follows this pattern.

A haiku typically consists of two contrasting images, its theme emerging from this contrast.

Figurative Language

The image of the guard tower, glinting in the sunset, contrasts with the simile, comparing the convicts to lizards, resting on rocks. From the contrast emerges the theme of the poem.

Context

Knight was imprisoned from 1960 to 1968 for armed robbery. In prison, he wrote poems about the pain and anguish of the life of a convict. He wrote a series of haikus which reveal the intensity of his ability to observe life around him and express his vision in the sharp, concise images that haikus require. “Eastern Guard Tower” is the first in the series. It was published in 1968, in *Poems from Prison*.

Learning Activities

1. Etheridge Knight's experiences shaped his writing. How do you think poems and other art forms help people to express ideas and experiences? How can poems, stories and literature help us to understand others' perspectives and lives? Are poems still relevant in the modern world?

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this section is adapted from “24 “Eastern Guard Tower” by Etheridge Knight (Haiku) (<https://opentextbc.ca/provincialenglish/chapter/eastern-guard-tower-by-etheridge-knight-haiku/>)” In *Composition and Literature* by James Sexton and Derek Soles, licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)./ Adaptations include reformatting the page and changing the accompanying activity.

Reference

Poetry Foundation. (n.d.). *Haiku by Etheridge Knight*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47593/haiku>

INFLUENCES ON MUSIC

Watch the following interview and music video and complete the learning activity.

Watch It: Music

Watch It: Music (Text version)

Watch Rebel Music | Native America| Interview with A Tribe Called Red (3 minutes) on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/O44O59dfOUk>)

Please watch this music video from A Tribe Called Red (the group from the previous video) before completing the learning activity.

Watch Halluci Nation ft. Black Bear- Stadium pow wow (official video) (4 minutes) on YouTube (https://youtu.be/eAEmjW9J3_o)

Activity Source: “Music” H5P activity created by Jessica Jones and oeratgc, licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#), except where otherwise noted.

Learning Activity

1. What influences inspired A Tribe Called Red to create music and perform? What feelings are evoked by the song and the images in the video?

Summary

A work of literature is affected by an author's history, culture, environment and world view. It is important to recognize these influences in order to better understand an author's intent and message. Communication is based on understanding each other. Understanding that an author's work can be informed by personal history and culture will help you to better identify the purpose and effect of any piece of writing.

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GLOSSARY

antagonist

anti = against

agonist = actor

one who acts against another.

climax

Where the conflict in a story reaches its peak.

protagonist

pro = move forward (propel)

proto = first

ag = act

agonist = actor

protagonist = first to move action forward/first actor

resolution

The part in the story where the main problem or conflict has been worked out.