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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Biographical Criticism and the Speaker of a Poem

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “*Mezzo Cammin*”:

Parapet, *n.*

1. A low protective wall along the edge of a raised structure
2. An earthen embankment protecting soldiers

Indolence, *n.*

Habitual laziness; sloth

Blast, *n.*

1. A very strong gust of wind
2. A violent explosion
3. A sudden, loud sound

Cataract, *n.*

1. A descent of water over a steep surface; a waterfall
2. Any furious rush of water

Examining an author’s life can inform and expand a literary text. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author’s experience. Some poems depend on a reader’s knowledge of biographical facts. However, readers should be careful not to assume that the speaker of a poem is necessarily the poet. When we read a poem, one of our first questions should be: whose “voice” is speaking to us? Sometimes a poet will create a *persona*, a fictitious speaker. This speaker may not always be human. A speaker may be an animal or object, and good poems have been written from perspectives as various as a hawk, a clock, or a cloud.

?? Discussion Activities

Longfellow’s sonnet “*Mezzo Cammin*”—a poem he wrote at age 35 but never published during his lifetime—is especially suited to biographical criticism. In the opening lines, the poet laments that he has not fulfilled “the aspiration of [his] youth”—which, for Longfellow, was nothing less than to create verse that would become as immortal as Shakespeare’s. The second quatrain explains this failed ambition was not because of “indolence,” a pursuit of “pleasure,” or “the fret / Of restless passions,” but because of “sorrow, and a care that almost killed.”

The key biographical question of the sonnet is: What caused this sorrow? At the beginning of 1835, Longfellow had just received a desirable new professorship at Harvard, and his beloved wife, Mary, was expecting their first child. Together they traveled to Scandinavia and Holland, where he studied Swedish, Finnish, Old Icelandic, and Dutch. But on this trip, Mary suffered a miscarriage, and a resulting infection led to her death. Longfellow was devastated. Several months later, he wrote in a letter: “I have a void in my heart—a constant feeling of sorrow and bereavement, and utter loneliness.”

Writing Exercise

Examine the last six lines. Write a paragraph answer for each question: Why might Longfellow capitalize “Past,” comparing it to a city? How does he describe this city? Does this city relate to Longfellow’s life? What does Longfellow suggest by closing his sonnet with the strong image of Death “thundering from the heights”? Conclude with one paragraph on how biographical details shed insight on poems, using Longfellow as an example.

Homework

Read Longfellow’s sonnet “*The Cross of Snow*.” What is the cross on his breast, and what does it have to do with “the face of one long dead”?