CHAPTER

17

Narrative Poetry

The Limerick, the Popular Ballad, and Other Narrative Poems

Most of us are so used to reading stories—whether factual in history books or fictional in novels—that we normally associate storytelling with prose, not with poetry. But in fact some of the world's great stories have been told in poetry—from the Greek epics the *Iliad* (about the Trojan War) and the *Odyssey* (about Odysseus' ten years of wandering), and the medieval tales of King Arthur to the Sanskrit epic *The Mahabharata* (about a war in ancient India) and African and American Indian tales of the creation of the world and of the sublime deeds of heroes. And, to descend to the ridiculous, countless narratives are still being told in the form of the limerick:

There Was a Young Fellow of Riga

There was a young fellow of Riga,
Who smiled as he rode on a tiger.
They returned from the ride,
With the fellow inside,
And the smile on the face of the tiger.

In short, although we are accustomed to thinking of a story as prose in a book, until a few hundred years ago stories were commonly poetry that was sung or recited. In nonliterate societies people got their stories from storytellers who relied on memory rather than on the written word; the memorized stories were often poems, partly because (in the words of Shakespeare's early contemporary, Sir Philip Sidney), "Verse far exceedeth prose in the knitting up of the memory." Even in literate societies, few people could read or write until the invention of the printing press in the middle of the fifteenth century. Although the printing press did not immediately destroy oral verse narratives, as the centuries passed, an increasingly large reading public developed that preferred prose narratives.

Among the great verse narratives are the English and Scottish **popular ballads**, some of the best of which are attributed to the fifteenth century, though they were not recorded until much later. These anonymous stories in song acquired their distinctive flavor by being passed down orally from generation to

generation, each singer consciously or unconsciously modifying his or her inheritance. It is not known who created the popular ballads; often they were made up partly out of earlier ballads by singers as bold as Kipling's cockney:

> When 'Omer smote 'is blooming lyre,
> He'd 'eard men sing by land an' sea;
> An' what he thought 'e might require,
> 'E went an' took—the same as me!

Most ballad singers probably were composers only by accident; they intended to transmit what they had heard, but their memories were sometimes faulty and their imaginations active. The modifications effected by oral transmission generally give a ballad three noticeable qualities:

1. It is impersonal; even if there is an "I" who sings the tale, he or she is usually characterless.
2. The ballad—like other oral literature such as the nursery rhyme and the counting-out rhyme ("one potato, two potato")—is filled with repetition, sometimes of lines, sometimes of words. Consider, for example, "Go saddle me the black, the black, / Go saddle me the brown," or "O wha is this has done this deid, / This ill deid don to me?" Sometimes in fact, the story is told by repeating lines with only a few significant variations. Oddly, these clichés do not bore us but by their impersonality often lend a simplicity that effectively contrasts with the frequent violence of the tales.
3. Because ballads are transmitted orally, residing in the memory rather than on the printed page, weak stanzas have often been dropped, leaving a series of sharp scenes, frequently with dialogue:

> The king sits in Dumferling toune,
> Drinking the blude-reid wine:
> "O whar will I get guid sailor,
> To sail this schip of mine?"

Because ballads were sung rather than printed, and because singers made alterations, no one version of a ballad is the "correct" one. The versions printed here have become such favorites that they are almost regarded as definitive, but the reader should consult a collection of ballads to get some idea of the wide variety.*

Popular ballads have been much imitated by professional poets, especially since the late eighteenth century. Two such literary ballads are Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (page 560) and Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." In a literary ballad the story is often infused with multiple meanings, with the insistent symbolic implications. Ambiguity is often found in the popular ballad also, but it is of a rather different sort. Perhaps because stanzas are lost, or perhaps because the singer was unconcerned with some elements of the story, the ambiguity of the popular ballad commonly lies in the story itself (who did what?) rather than in the significance of the story (what does it all add up to, what does it mean?).

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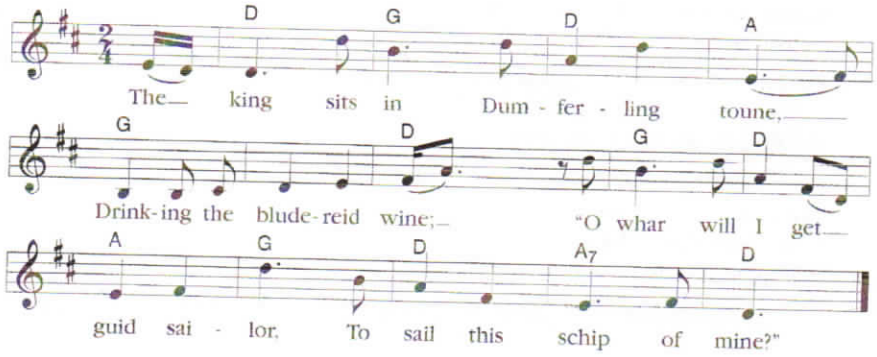
*See Albert B. Friedman, ed., *The Penguin Book of Folk Ballads of the English-Speaking World* (1977); and Frederick Woods, ed., *The Oxford Book of English Traditional Verse* (1983).

Finally, a word about some of the most popular professional folksingers today. They have aptly been called "folksongers" because unlike illiterate or scarcely literate folksingers—who intend only to sing the traditional songs in the traditional way for themselves or their neighbors—these professionals are vocal artists who make commercial and political use (not bad things in themselves) of traditional folk songs, deliberately adapting old songs and inventing new songs that only loosely resemble the old ones. These contemporary ballads tend to be more personal than traditional ballads and they tend to have a social consciousness that is alien to traditional balladry. Many of the songs of Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan, for instance, are conspicuous examples of art in the service of morality or politics; they call attention to injustice and they seek to move the hearers to action. That traditional ballads have assisted in this task is not the least of their value; the influence of a work of art is never finished, and the old ballads can rightly claim to share in the lives of their modern descendants.

We print a popular traditional English ballad here ("Sir Patrick Spence"), followed (page 560) by a poem that is indebted to traditional ballads (John Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci"). We also present several short narrative poems—poems that tell a story—that are *not* in the ballad tradition. (For additional ballads, see "The Three Ravens," "The Twa Corbies," and "John Henry" in Chapter 28; for a literary ballad by an African American author, see Langston Hughes's "Ballad of the Landlord," page 765.)

ANONYMOUS BRITISH BALLAD

Sir Patrick Spence



The king sits in Dumferling toune,
Drinking the blude-reid wine:
"O whar will I get guid sailor,
To sail this schip of mine?"

Up and spak an eldern knicht,
Sat at the kings richt kne:
"Sir Patrick Spence is the best sailor,
That sails upon the se."

The king has written a braid° Letter,
And signed it wi' his hand,
And sent it to Sir Patrick Spence,
Was walking on the sand.

The first line that Sir Patrick red,
A loud lauch° lauched he;
The next line that Sir Patrick red,
The tier blinded his ee.

"O wha is this has done this deid,
This ill deid don to me,
To send me out this time o' the yeir,
To sail upon the se?

"Mak hast, mak hast, my mirry men all,
Our guid schip sails the morne":
"O say na sae, my master deir,
For I feir a deadlie storme."

"Late late yestreen I saw the new moone,
Wi' the auld moone in hir arme,
And I feir, I feir, my deir master,
That we will cum to harme."

O our Scots nobles wer richt laith°
To weet their cork-heild schoone;°
Bot lang owre° a' the play wer playd,
Thair hats they swam aboone,°

O lang, lang may their ladies sit,
Wi' thair fans into their hand,
Or eir° they se Sir Patrick Spence
Cum sailing to the land.

O lang, lang may the ladies stand,
Wi' thair gold kems in their hair,
Waiting for their ain deir lords,
For they'll se thame na mair.

Have owre° to Aberdour,
It's fiftie fadon deip,
And thair lies guid Sir Patrick Spence,
Wi' the Scots lords at his feit.

YOUR TURN

1. The shipwreck occurs between lines 29 and 32, but it is not described. Does the omission stimulate the reader to imagine the details of the wreck? Or does the omission suggest that the poem is not so much

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9 braid broad, open. **14 lauch** laugh. **29 laith** loath. **30 cork-heild schoone** cork-heeled shoes. **31 owre** ere. **32 aboone** above. **35 eir** evere. **41 Have owre** Half over.

about a shipwreck as it is about kinds of behavior? Explain. What do lines 33–40 contribute?

2. Might lines 17–18 warrant the inference that the "eldern knicht" (line 5) is Sir Patrick's enemy?
3. Explain lines 13–16.
4. In place of lines 37–40, another version of this ballad has the following stanza:

   The ladies crack't their fingers white,
   The maidens tore their hair,
   A' for the sake o' their true loves,
   For them they ne'er saw mair.

   Why is one more effective than the other?

5. In the other version, the stanza that is here the final one (lines 41–44) precedes the stanzas about the ladies (lines 33–40). Which stanza makes a better conclusion? Why?
6. Is Sir Patrick heroic? Please explain.
7. Is Sir Patrick's decision to obey the king's command right or wrong? Is he responsible for the deaths of his "mirry men"?
8. What do you imagine was the response of the first readers to this poem, many centuries ago? What is your own response to it? How do you explain the continuities, or the differences, between these past and present responses?

GARY SNYDER

Gary Snyder, born in 1930, grew up on a farm north of Seattle and then in Portland, Oregon. He then went to Reed College, working during the summers with the U.S. Forest Service and in logging camps. After studying linguistics and American Indian culture at the University of Indiana, he moved to San Francisco, where he studied Japanese and became part of the "Beat" movement. (He is the hero of Jack Kerouac's novel, The Dharma Bums, ***1958.) In 1956 he went to Japan, where he lived for ten years. He then returned and settled with his family in the foothills of the northern Sierra Nevada. His publications include*** The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations ***(1999).***

Hay for the Horses [1959]

He had driven half the night
From far down San Joaquin
Through Mariposa, up the
Dangerous mountain roads,
And pulled in at eight a.m.
With his big truckload of hay
behind the barn.
With winch and ropes and hooks
We stacked the bales up clean
To splintery redwood rafters
High in the dark, flecks of alfalfa
Whirling through shingle-cracks of light,

Itch of haydust in the
sweaty shirt and shoes.
At lunchtime under Black oak
Out in the hot corral,
—The old mare nosing lunchpails,
Grasshoppers crackling in the weeds—
"I'm sixty-eight" he said,
"I first bucked hay when I was seventeen.
I thought, that day I started,
I sure would hate to do this all my life.
And dammit, that's just what
I've gone and done."

YOUR TURN

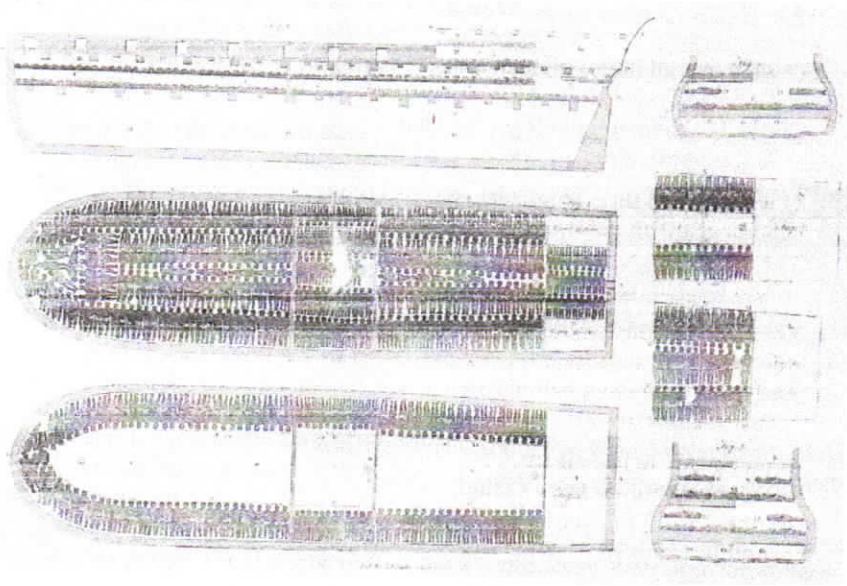
1. The speaker does not explicitly offer his opinion of the man who "had driven half the night" but do the first two sentences (lines 1–14) communicate at least a hint of an attitude?
2. The old man who speaks lines 19–24 sums up his life. He seems to regard it as wasted, but as we hear his words do we hear bitterness? Self-pity? What is our attitude toward him, and how does it compare with that of the speaker of the poem?

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Kidnapped in Africa when she was a child of about age seven, and brought to Boston on the schooner Phillis, *Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) owed her first name to the ship and her second to the family name of the merchant who bought her to attend on his wife. She was educated in English, Latin, history, and geography, and especially in the Bible, and within a few years she was writing poetry in the approved manner—that is, the manner of eighteenth-century England. In 1773, the year she was granted freedom, she published a book of her poems in England.*

Despite her education and the style of writing that she adopted, Wheatley of course did not move freely in the white world. But neither did she move freely in the black world, since her educators kept her away from other persons of African origin. Perhaps the best single sentence ever written about Phillis Wheatley is Richard Wright's: "Before the webs of slavery had so tightened as to snare nearly all Negroes in our land, one was freed by accident to give in clear, bell-like limpid cadence the hope of freedom in the New World." One other sentence about Wheatley, by another African American writer, should also be quoted here. Alice Walker, commenting on Wheatley's much criticized assumption of white values, says, in an address to Wheatley, "It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, the notion of song."

"On Being Brought from Africa to America" alludes to the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4.15), which reports that Cain killed Abel, and that "the Lord set a mark upon Cain." The biblical text explicitly says that the mark was to protect Cain from someone who might take vengeance on him, but it does



Phillis Wheatley was probably brought to America on a slave ship such as this one showing how the slaves were packed. The English abolitionist Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846) distributed this drawing with his *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786; rpt. 1804).

not say what the mark was. Nevertheless, some Christians developed the idea that the color of Africans was the mark of Cain.

On Being Brought from Africa to America [1772]

'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Savior too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their color is a diabolic dye."
Remember, Christians; Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refined, and join the angelic train.

JOHN KEATS

John Keats (1795–1821), son of a London stable keeper, was taken out of school at age fifteen and apprenticed to a surgeon and apothecary. In 1816 he was licensed to practice as an apothecary-surgeon, but he almost immediately abandoned medicine and decided to make a career as a poet. His progress was amazing; he published books of poems—to mixed reviews—in 1817, 1818, and 1820, before dying of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five. Today he is esteemed as one of England's greatest poets.

Additional poems by Keats appear on pages 587, 622, and 810.

*La Belle Dame sans Merci** [1819]

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

"I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

"I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;°
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

"I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend and sing
A faery's song.

"She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew,
And sure in language strange she said
'I love thee true.'

"She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she wept and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

"And there she lullèd me asleep,
And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dreamed
On the cold hill side.

"I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall!'

*__La Belle Dame sans Merci__ the beautiful lady without pity. **18 fragrant zone** belt of flowers.

"I saw their starved lips in the gloam
With horrid warning gapèd wide,
And I awoke, and found me here,
On the cold hill's side.

"And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge has withered from the lake,
And no birds sing."

YOUR TURN

1. In the first three stanzas the speaker describes the knight as pale, haggard, and so forth. In the rest of the poem the knight recounts his experience. In a few sentences summarize the knight's experience, and indicate why it has caused him to appear as he now does.
2. The *femme fatale*—the dangerously seductive woman—appears often in literature. If you are familiar with one such work, compare it with Keats's poem.
3. What characteristics of the popular ballad (see page 554) do you find in this poem? What characteristic does it *not* share with popular ballads? Set forth your response in an essay of 500 words.
4. Is this poem about love, or death, or both? Please explain, making references to details in the text.
5. What is your response to this poem? Do you feel a connection to the characters? What kind of connection?
6. Keats said that "La Belle Dame sans Merci" was not one of his best or most serious poems, yet later generations of readers have valued it highly. How do you explain this discrepancy? Are poets reliable judges of the merits of their own poems?

SIEGFRIED SASSOON

Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967), a wealthy Englishman, served with such distinction in World War I—in 1915 under heavy fire he helped a wounded soldier to safety—that he was awarded the Military Cross. Later, wounded by a bullet in the chest, he was sent from France back to England, where, upon reflection, he concluded that the war was not a war of defense but of aggression. Military officials shrewdly chose not to dispute him, but merely asserted that he was shell-shocked. When Sassoon recovered from the bullet wound, he was again sent into combat, and was again wounded and hospitalized.

Sassoon expressed his views in Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man *(1928) and* Memoirs of an Infantry Officer *(1930), as well as in* Collected Poems, 1908–1956 *(1961).*

The General [1917]

"Good-morning, good-morning!" the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,

And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
"He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

YOUR TURN

1. Who is the storyteller, and what is the story he tells?
2. Why do you suppose Sassoon put an extra space between the next-to-last line and the last line? Speaking of the last line, notice that it rhymes with the two preceding lines—i.e., the last three lines end with identical sounds, whereas in the preceding four lines, no two adjacent lines rhyme. Why do you suppose Sassoon changed the rhyme-scheme for the final lines?
3. How would you characterize the General? How would you characterize Harry? How would you characterize the storyteller?

COUNTEE CULLEN

Countee Cullen (1903–1946) was born Countee Porter in New York City, raised by his grandmother, and then adopted by the Reverend Frederick A. Cullen, a Methodist minister in Harlem. Cullen received a bachelor's degree from New York University (Phi Beta Kappa) and a master's degree from Harvard. He earned his living as a high school teacher of French, but his literary gifts were recognized in his own day, and he went on to become a leading African American poet of the modern period.

Incident

[1925]

(For Eric Walrond)

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

YOUR TURN

1. How would you define an "incident"? A serious occurrence? A minor occurrence, or what? Think about the word, and then think about Cullen's use of it as a title for the event recorded in this poem. Test out

one or two other possible titles as a way of helping yourself to see the strengths or weaknesses of Cullen's title.

2. The dedicatee, Eric Walrond (1898–1966) was an African American essayist and writer of fiction, who in an essay, "On Being Black," had described his experiences of racial prejudice. How does the presence of the dedication bear on our response to Cullen's account of the "incident"?
3. What is the tone of the poem? Indifferent? Angry? Or what? What do you think is the speaker's attitude toward the "incident"? What is your attitude?
4. Ezra Pound, poet and critic, once defined literature as "news that *stays* news." What do you think he meant by this? Do you think that the definition fits Cullen's poem?

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935) grew up in Gardiner, Maine, spent two years at Harvard, and then returned to Maine, where he published his first book of poetry in 1896. Though he received encouragement from neighbors, his finances were precarious, even after President Theodore Roosevelt, having been made aware of the book, secured for him an appointment as customs inspector in New York from 1905 to 1909. Additional books won fame for Robinson, and in 1922 he was awarded the first of the three Pulitzer Prizes for poetry that he would win.

Richard Cory [1897]

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine,° we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

11 In fine in short.

YOUR TURN

1. Consult the entry on **irony** in the glossary (page 1473). Then read the pages referred to in the entry. Finally, write an essay of 500 words on irony in "Richard Cory."
2. What do you think were Richard Cory's thoughts shortly before he "put a bullet through his head"? In 500 words, set forth his thoughts and actions (what he sees and does). If you wish, you can write in the first person, from Cory's point of view. Further, if you wish, your essay can be in the form of a suicide note.
3. Write a sketch (250–350 words) setting forth your early impression or understanding of someone whose later actions revealed you had not understood the person.

EMILY DICKINSON

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), born into a proper New England family in Amherst, Massachusetts, was brought up as a Protestant. Much of her poetry concerns death and heaven, but it is far from being conventionally Christian.

For a more complete biographical note and a selection of Dickinson's poems and letters, see Chapter 27.

Because I could not stop for Death [1890]

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

YOUR TURN

1. Characterize death as it appears in lines 1–8.
2. What is the significance of the details and their arrangement in the third stanza? Why "strove" rather than "played" (line 9)? What meaning does "Ring" (line 10) have? Is "Gazing Grain" better than "Golden Grain"?
3. The "House" in the fifth stanza is a sort of riddle. What is the answer? Does this stanza introduce an aspect of death not present—or present only very faintly—in the rest of the poem? Explain.
4. Evaluate this statement about the poem (from Yvor Winters's *In Defense of Reason*): "In so far as it concentrates on the life that is being left behind, it is wholly successful; in so far as it attempts to experience the death to come, it is fraudulent, however exquisitely."

WALTER DE LA MARE

Walter de la Mare (1873–1956), was born in Kent, in England. He worked for many years as an accountant for the London office of Standard Oil until a legacy enabled him to devote his life to writing lyric poetry and fiction.

The Listeners [1912]

"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveler,
  Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
  Of the forest's ferny floor.
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
  Above the Traveler's head:
And he smote upon the door again a second time;
  "Is there anybody there?" he said.
But no one descended to the Traveler;
  No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his gray eyes,
  Where he stood perplexed and still.
But only a host of phantom listeners
  That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
  To that voice from the world of men:
Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair
  That goes down to the empty hall,
Hearkening in an air stirred and shaken
  By the lonely Traveler's call.
And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
  Their stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
  'Neath the starred and leafy sky;
For he suddenly smote on the door, even
  Louder, and lifted his head: —

"Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word," he said.
Never the least stir made the listeners,
Though every word he spake
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house
From the one man left awake:
Aye, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backward,
When the plunging hoofs were gone.

YOUR TURN

1. Walter de la Mare is reported to have said that the Traveler is a ghost. He is also reported to have said on another occasion that the poem records a class reunion at which he found himself the only one present. Is either of these explanations convincing? Is there anything in the poem to refute the first explanation?
2. Is the poem a narrative of a man who fulfilled a promise, though the ones to whom the promise was made are dead? Is it a narrative of a man who fulfilled a promise in the face of evil forces? Of a frustrated, heroic search for the meaning of life? Of our mysterious separation from the dead? In 100 to 150 words, evaluate one of these interpretations.
3. Why are the actions of the horse described (lines 3, 23)?
4. Why did de la Mare call the poem "The Listeners" rather than "The Traveler"?

JOHN LENNON AND PAUL McCARTNEY

John Lennon (1940–1980) and Paul McCartney (b. 1942) were original members of the Beatles.

Eleanor Rigby [1966]

Ah, look at all the lonely people!
Ah, look at all the lonely people!

Eleanor Rigby
Picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been,
Lives in a dream.
Waits at the window
Wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door.
Who is it for?

All the lonely people,
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people,
Where do they all belong?

Father McKenzie,
Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear,
No one comes near.
Look at him working,
Darning his socks in the night when there's nobody there.
What does he care?

All the lonely people,
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people,
Where do they all belong?

Ah, look at all the lonely people!
Ah, look at all the lonely people!
Eleanor Rigby
Died in the church and was buried along with her name,
Nobody came.
Father McKenzie,
Wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave,
No one was saved.

All the lonely people,
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people,
Where do they all belong?

Ah, look at all the lonely people!
Ah, look at all the lonely people!

YOUR TURN

Is the poem chiefly about Eleanor Rigby? What is Father McKenzie doing in the poem?

E. E. CUMMINGS

***e. e. cummings** was the pen name of Edward Estlin Cummings (1894–1962), who grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and graduated from Harvard, where he became interested in modern literature and art, especially in the movements called cubism and futurism. His father, a conservative clergyman and a professor at Harvard, seems to have been baffled by the youth's interests, but cummings's mother encouraged his artistic activities, including his use of unconventional punctuation and capitalization.*

Politically liberal in his youth, cummings became more conservative after a visit to Russia in 1931, but early and late his work emphasizes individuality and freedom of expression.

anyone lived in a pretty how town

[1940]

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men(both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then)they
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain

YOUR TURN

1. Put into normal order (as far as possible) the words of the first two stanzas, and then compare your version with cummings's. What does cummings gain—or lose?
2. Characterize the "anyone" who "sang his didn't" and "danced his did." In your opinion, how does he differ from the people who "sowed their isn't they reaped their same"?
3. Some readers interpret "anyone died" (line 25) to mean that the child matured and became as dead as the other adults. How might you support or refute this interpretation?