

A Worker Reads History (1936)

Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956)

Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
The books are filled with names of kings.
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?
And Babylon, so many times destroyed,
Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima's houses, 5
That city glittering with gold, lived those who built it?
In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished
Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome
Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up? Over whom
Did the Caesars triumph? Byzantium lives in song, 10
Were all her dwellings palaces? And even in Atlantis of the legend
The night the sea rushed in,
The drowning men still bellowed for their slaves.

Young Alexander conquered India.
He alone? 15
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Was there not even a cook in his army?
Philip of Spain wept as his fleet
Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?
Frederick the Great triumphed in the Seven Years War. Who 20
Triumphed with him?

Each page a victory,
At whose expense the victory ball?
Every ten years a great man,
Who paid the piper? 25

So many particulars.
So many questions.
Questions to ponder:
1. What is the importance of the title? (Hint: consider the literary elements)

2. List all of the roles (or jobs) that are mentioned in the poem.
3. Do all of those roles appear in social studies books? Which ones?
4. What is the purpose of having so many interrogative sentences? Are they purely rhetorical?
5. Explain the meaning of line 24. Is it to be taken literally?
6. Line 25 is an allusion to a famous fable. Explain it.
7. Where do women of the working classes appear in the poem? Why doesn't the author mention their work? Why is this ironic?
8. To what extent and how are the working classes represented in the social studies you learn in school?
9. What is the tone of this poem? (BTW, it does connect with the theme.)

For a Lady I Know

Countee Cullen (1903 – 1946)

She even thinks that up in heaven

Her class lies late and snores,
While poor black cherubs rise at seven
To celestial chores.

Questions for your consideration

1. In just 23 words, the poet reveals his bias and point of view. What are they? Why might he have such a bias? (use Google)
2. What does the word "class" mean in line 2?
3. Put a description together of the "she" in line 1.
4. What image is created by the use of the word "cherub"?
5. What tone does the poet create? How does he do this?

The golf links lie so near the mill (1917)

Sarah Cleghorn (1876 – 1959)

The golf links lie so near the mill

That almost every day

The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play.

Directions for your thoughts

1. What does the word “mill” mean in line 1?
2. Even though the word “class” is not in this poem, it is implied. Explain how it works here.
3. Look up the word “juxtaposition.” Define it here and then explain how it functions in this poem.
4. Where is the irony in this poem and how does it connect to the theme?
5. Note the rhyme and rhythm of the lines. There is an alternating of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. This creates a “sing song” nursery rhyme quality. How does this affect the poem’s message?

Ballad of the Landlord (1951)

Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967)

Landlord, landlord,
My roof has sprung a leak.
Don’t you ‘member I told you about it
Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,

These steps is broken down.
When you come up yourself
It's a wonder you don't fall down.

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
Ten Bucks you say is due?

10

Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
Till you fix this house up new.

What? You gonna get eviction orders?
You gonna cut off my heat?
You gonna take my furniture and

15

Throw it in the street?

Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.
Talk on – till you get through.
You ain't gonna be able to say a word
If I land my fist on you.

20

Police! Police!
Come and get this man!
He's trying to ruin the government
And overturn the land!

Copper's whistle!

25

Patrol bell!
Arrest.

Precinct Station.

Iron cell.

Headlines in press:

30

MAN THREATENS LANDLORD

TENANT HELD NO BAIL

JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL

Questions to help us understand

1. What is the purpose of the questions in this poem? Are they rhetorical only?
2. A setting is implied here. Describe it.
3. Who is arrested? From your point of view, is this justice? Explain.
4. What is missing in your understanding of this incident if you only saw the newspaper headlines?
5. What is the effect of the short lines 25-30?
6. Why does the title draw attention to the landlord? Why isn't the title <Ballad of the Tenant>?

Tired (1922)

Fenton Johnson (1888 – 1958)

I am tired of work; I am tired of building up somebody
else's civilization.

Let us take a rest, M'Lissy Jane.

I will go down to the Last Chance Saloon, drink a gallon
or two of gin, shoot a game or two of dice and 5
sleep the rest of the night on one of Mike's barrels.

You will let the old shanty go to rot, the white people's
clothes turn to dust, and the Calvary Baptist Church
sink to the bottomless pit.

You will spend your days forgetting you married me and 10
your nights hunting the warm gin Mike serves the
ladies in the rear of the Last Chance Saloon.

Throw the children into the river; civilization has given
us too many. It is better to die than it is to grow up
and find out that you are colored. 15

Pluck the stars out of the heavens. The stars mark our
destiny. The stars marked my destiny.

I am tired of civilization.

Ponder these Questions

1. Who is the narrator of this poem? What clues are there in the poem to help you answer?
2. What effect is created by the imagery in lines 4--9?
3. Identify the mood of this poem and then identify the tone.
4. Define irony.
5. What effect is created by the use and repetition of the word "civilization"?

Two Tramps In Mud Time (1936)

Robert Frost (1874 – 1963)

Out of the mud two strangers came
And caught me splitting wood in the yard.
And one of them put me off my aim
By hailing cheerily “Hit them hard!”
I knew pretty well why he dropped behind
And let the other go on a way.
I knew pretty well what he had in mind:
He wanted to take my job for pay.

5

Good blocks of oak it was I split,
As large around as the chopping block;

10

And every piece I squarely hit
Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.
The blows that a life of self-control

Spares to strike for the common good,
That day, giving a loose to my soul,

15

I spent on the unimportant wood.

The sun was warm but the wind was chill.
You know how it is with an April day
When the sun is out and the wind is still,
You're one month on in the middle of May.

20

But if you so much as dare to speak,
A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,
A wind comes off a frozen peak,
And you're two months back in the middle of March.

A bluebird comes tenderly up to alight

25

And turns to the wind to unruffle a plume,
His song so pitched as not to excite
A single flower as yet to bloom.
It is snowing a flake: and he half knew
Winter was only playing possum.

30

Except in color he isn't blue,
But he wouldn't advise a thing to blossom.

The water for which we may have to look
In summertime with a witching wand,
In every wheelrut's now a brook,

35

In every print of a hoof a pond.
Be glad of water, but don't forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath
That will steal forth after the sun is set
And show on the water its crystal teeth.

40

The time when most I loved my task
These two must make me love it more

By coming with what they came to ask.
You'd think I never had felt before
The weight of an ax-head poised aloft,
45

The grip on earth of outspread feet,
The life of muscles rocking soft
And smooth and moist in vernal heat.

Out of the woods two hulking tramps
(from sleeping God knows where last night,
50

But not long since in the lumber camps.)
They thought all chopping was theirs of right.
Men of the woods and lumberjacks,
They judged me by their appropriate tool.
Except as a fellow handled an ax
55

They had no way of knowing a fool.

Nothing on either side was said.
They knew they had but to stay their stay
And all their logic would fill my head:
As that I had no right to play
60

With what was another man's work for gain.
My right might be love but theirs was need.
And where the two exist in twain
Theirs was the better right--agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,
65

My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
70

Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

Things to think about

1. What is the narrator doing, and is he enjoying it?
2. What is meant by a “life of self-control” (line 13)? Do you have a life of self-control?
3. Lines 14 and 16 form an antithesis. Explain how this works.
4. What did the two tramps want?
5. What figurative language can be seen in lines 38—40? What effect is created?
6. State a theme about work that can be supported by events in this poem.

*The Triangle Fire*¹ (1983)

Mary Fell (b. 1947)

1. *Havdallah*²

This is the great divide
by which God split
the world:

on the Sabbath side
he granted rest,
eternal toiling
on the workday side.

5

But even one
revolution of the world
is an empty promise
where bosses
where bills to pay
respect no heavenly bargains.
Until each day is ours

10

let us pour
darkness in a dish
and set it on fire,
bless those who labor
as we pray, praise God
his holy name,
strike for the rest.

15

20

1:On March 25, 1911, a fire started at the Triangle Shirtwaist, on the ninth floor of the Asch Building. Hundreds of women workers, mostly Italian and Russian Jewish immigrants, had been locked in to keep out union organizers and therefore could not escape. Nearly one hundred fifty women, some as young as fourteen, died in the fire.

2:Ceremony marking the end of the Jewish Sabbath.

2. *Among the Dead*

First a lace of smoke
decorated the air of the workroom,
the far wall unfolded
into fire. The elevator shaft 25
spun out flames like a bobbin,
the last car sank.
I leaped for the cable,
my only chance. Woven steel
burned my hands as I wound 30
to the bottom.

I opened my eyes. I was lying
in the street. Water and blood
washed the cobbles, the sky
rained ash. A pair of shoes 35
lay beside me, in them
two blistered feet.
I saw the weave in the fabric
of a girl's good coat,
the wilted nosegay pinned to her collar. 40
Not flowers, what I breathed then,
awake among the dead.

3. *Asch Building*

In a window,
lovers embrace
haloed by light. 45
He kisses her, holds her
gently, lets her go
nine stories to the street.

Even the small ones
put on weight 50
as they fall:
eleven thousand pounds split
the fireman's net,
implode the deadlights

on the Greene Street side, 55
until the basement catches them
and holds. Here
two faceless ones are found
folded neatly over the steam pipes
like dropped rags. 60

I like the one
on that smoky ledge, taking stock
in the sky's deliberate mirror.
She gives her hat
to wind, noting its style, 65
spills her week's pay.

from its envelope, a joke
on those who pretend
heaven provides, and chooses
where there is no choice 70
to marry air, to make
a disposition of her life.

4. Personal Effects

One lady's
handbag, containing
rosary beads, elevated 75
railroad ticket, small pin
with picture, pocket knife,
one small purse containing
\$1.68 in cash,
handkerchiefs, 80
a small mirror, a pair of gloves,

| | |
|---|----|
| two thimbles, a Spanish comb, one yellow metal ring, five keys, one fancy glove button, | 85 |
| one lady's handbag containing one gent's watch case number of movement 6418593 and a \$1 bill, | |
| one half dozen postal cards, a buttonhook, a man's photo, a man's garter, a razor strap, | 90 |
| one portion of limb and hair of human being. | 95 |

5. *Industrialist's Dream*

| | |
|--|-----|
| This one's dependable won't fall apart under pressure doesn't lie down on the job doesn't leave early come late won't join unions strike | 100 |
| ask for a raise unlike one hundred forty six others I could name who couldn't | 105 |
| take the heat this one's still at her machine and doubtless of spotless moral character you | 110 |
| can tell by the bones pure white this one does what she's told | 115 |

and you don't hear
her complaining. 120

6. *The Witness*

Woman, I might have watched you
sashay down Washington Street
some warm spring evening
when work let out,
your one thin dress 125
finally right for the weather,
an ankle pretty
as any flower's stem, full
breasts the moon's envy, eyes bold
or modest as you passed me by. 130

I might have thought, as heat
climbed from the pavement,
what soft work you'd make
for a man like me:
even the time clock, thief of hours, 135
kinder, and the long day
passing in a dream.

Cradled in that dream
I might have slept
forever, but today's nightmare 140
vision woke me:

your arms aflame, wings
of fire, and you a falling star,
a terrible lump of coal
in the burning street. 145

No dream, your hair of smoke,
your blackened face.
No dream the fist I make,
taking your hand
of ashes in my own. 150

7. *Cortege*

A cold rain comforts the sky.

Everything ash-colored under clouds.
I take my place in the crowd,

move without will as the procession moves,
a gray wave breaking against the street. 155
Up ahead, one hundred and forty seven

coffins float, wreckage of lives. I follow
the box without a name. In it
whose hand encloses whose heart? Whose mouth

presses the air toward a scream? 160
She is no one, the one I claim
as sister. When the familiar is tagged

and taken away, she remains.
I do not mourn her. I mourn no one,
I do not praise her. No one 165

is left to praise. Seventy years after
her death, I walk in March rain behind her.
She travels before me into the dark.

Questions to respond to

1. Why do you think the first section of the poem is entitled, “Havdallah”?
2. List the figurative language in the second section and explain the effectiveness.
3. Explain how the imagery in section 3 functions as an understatement.
4. What is the tone of section 5?
5. Google “Binghamton factory fire” and read what you find. Then make a guess about the factory conditions at the turn of the century in this country. What class of people was mainly affected? Were they in a position to affect changes?

So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs From Americans (1979)

Jimmy Santiago Baca (b. 1952)

O Yes? Do they come on horses
with rifles, and say,
Ese gringo,³ gimmee your job?
And do you, gringo, take off your ring,
drop your wallet into a blanket
spread over the ground, and walk away?

5

I hear Mexicans are taking your jobs away.
Do they sneak into town at night,
and as you're walking home with a whore,
do they mug you, a knife at your throat,
10
saying, I want your job?

Even on TV, an asthmatic leader
crawls turtle heavy, leaning on an assistant,
and from a nest of wrinkles on his face,
a tongue paddles through flashing waves
of lightbubs, of cameramen, rasping
"They're taking our jobs away."

15

Well, I've gone about trying to find them,
asking just where the hell are these fighters.

The rifles I hear sound in the night
are white farmers shooting blacks and browns
whose ribs I see jutting out
and starving children,
I see the poor marching for a little work,
I see small white farmers selling out
to clean-suited farmers living in New York,
who've never been on a farm,
don't know the look of a hoof or the smell
of a woman's body bending all day long in fields.

20

25

³ Hey, whitey.

I see this, and I hear only a few people

30

got all the money in this world, the rest
count their pennies to buy bread and butter.

Below that cool green sea of money,
millions and millions of people fight to live,
search for pearls in the darkest depths
of their dreams, hold their breath for years
trying to cross poverty to just having something.

35

The children are dead already. We are killing them,
that is what America should be saying;
on TV, in the streets, in offices, should be saying,
“We aren’t giving the children a chance to live.”

40

Mexicans are taking our jobs, they say instead.
What they really say is, let them die,
and the children too.

Things to think about

1. In many of the discussions about illegal immigrants and unemployment in this country, you will often hear people say that the Mexicans are getting jobs that American citizens need. With this in mind, to whom is the poem addressed? In other words, to whom is the narrator speaking?
2. Lines 20 to 29 present an alternative picture. Try to explain that.
3. In the section formed by lines 33 – 37, explain the metaphors you see.
4. How do Americans characterize Mexicans?
5. What image does the poet use to force you to a different perception of this situation?
6. Who has the power in this country? Do those with power willingly share what they have with those that have-not? According to this poem, might there be another perception than that given us by the media?