

English 30-1
Five-Day Poetry Package
Day 4

1. Complete the reading-comprehension quiz on "Common Magic" by Bronwen Wallace.
2. Study "Love Under the Republicans (or Democrats)" by Ogden Nash, and then compose a paragraph-length critical commentary in which you argue that, in spite of its "silliness," the poem has something serious to say about the idea that unexpected impulses lie just beneath people's surfaces.

Tamer and Hawk
Thom Gunn

I thought I was so tough,
But gentled at your hands,
Cannot be quick enough
To fly for you and show
That when I go I go
At your commands.

Even in flight above
I am no longer free:
You seeled¹ me with your love,
I am blind to other birds?
The habit of your words
Has hooded me.

As formerly, I wheel,
I hover and I twist,
But only want the feel,
In my possessive thought,
Of catcher and of caught
Upon your wrist.

You but half civilize,
Taming me in this way.
Through having only eyes
For you I fear to lose,
I lose to keep, and choose
Tamer as prey.

¹ **seeled:** to seel is to stitch closed the eyes of a hawk or falcon

Commentary on Gunn's "Tamer and Hawk"

At first reading, Thom Gunn's "Tamer and Hawk" seems to be about obsessive love. A man (presumably a man, for the poet is probably the better part of the speaker) considers the history of his love for another. He considers that initially his lover "gentled" him—brought him from an attitude of rugged independence to one of tenderness and made this now gentle man want to please his lover completely. But he does not feel equal to that task—"Cannot be quick enough" to "show / That when [he goes he goes] / At [his lover's] commands." He considers, too, that his devotion has become an obsession that occludes his focus on anything else. He has been made to feel comfortable when perched, "seeled" and "hooded," on his

lover's arm. Now he finds that all he does for his lover is done with what seems a kind of heartlessness. For all his ostensible movement, he feels a kind of paralysis; *none* of his motion, the wheeling or hovering or twisting, is made now for the sake of the motion itself but for the lover whom, he feels, he cannot ultimately satisfy anyway. At this recognition, his thought takes a dark turn, and he considers finally that what he cannot please, he must destroy. His various acts of love will become a single act of attack.

But Gunn's poem is probably larger than this reading suggests. "Tamer and Hawk" does not *have* to be a poem about a relationship between two lovers. It may be about *one* person—and a person who stands figuratively for all people capable of noting their own idiosyncratic passions and the effects of those passions in their lives.

A second reading of the poem may suggest that its broader focus (from the bird's-eye point of view) is on the twining experiences of passion and control, human agencies that may stand both in harmony and at odds. Passion for something—a person, a spirit, an idea, an activity, an exclusive way of being—is a decidedly human capacity, the source of limitless creative energy. It is a civilizing impulse because it gives us the feeling and the fuel we need to envision and build. But at the same time passion is *passionate*. By nature natural, it is the animal in us. Passion is intuitive, wild emotion; it is unpredictable and rapacious; it is resistance to restraint. For this reason, partly, animals are not the builders of civilizations. Humans are. Humans have the ability to take their divergent animal energies and, godlike, turn them to convergence—to marshal their passions—in the service of designing and building things ordered and durable. But what happens when passion marshals the passionate? Nothing ordered and durable will then be made, and we "but half civilize" ourselves, even as we "but half civilize" a passion. And in this case, two halves do not make a whole.

This understanding of the poem is achieved by an examination of various elements. Note, for example, Gunn's point of view, which is unexpected: not that of the passionate person but of the passion itself, in this case animated in the persona of a hawk who experiences a progression, for he is shown to make a discovery about himself in relation to his keeper. His is the ruling voice of the poem, and the idea is that a passion has a life of its own. Cast in the spirit of a wild bird, that life is not—though for a moment it seems to be—subject to external control. Its first and last impulse is to act independently, uncontrollably. The hawk behaves subserviently for a time, appears "civilized." However, civility is only his *context*, which is tidily reflected in the poem's metrical regularity and steady rhyme scheme, its "habit of . . . words"; meanwhile, his *subtext* is bestial, as the final stanza, like a darkly ironic afterthought, implies. In fact, though, this stanza is no mere afterthought but the *central* thought without which the rest of the poem would seem meaningless. It is the conclusive moment when one with a passion, the would-be "tamer," knows that his or her passion may prove a devourer. Passion is "possessive." Passion will "fear to lose" and so must "lose to keep"; Gunn's clever phrasing, used to emphasize an ominous recognition in both the "catcher and . . . caught," is at once elegant and chilling.

Finally, Gunn's lyric seems to suggest that one's ruling passion can become one's ruler. We may read the idea that when a person becomes obsessed—devoted to one joy or one labour, to only one breed of fulfillment—such that all other passions, the "other birds," are made non-existent—he or she is living an unbalanced and ultimately self-destructive life.

My Last Duchess
Robert Browning

Ferrara

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read

Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
 And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
 How such a glance came there; so, not the first
 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
 Her husband's presence only, called that spot
 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
 Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
 Over my Lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
 Must never hope to reproduce the faint
 Half-flush that dies along her throat"; such stuff
 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
 For calling up that spot of joy. She had
 A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
 Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
 Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,
 The bough of cherries some officious fool
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
 She rode with round the terrace—all and each
 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
 Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good; but thanked
 Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
 With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
 In speech—which I have not—to make your will
 Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
 Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
 Or there exceed, the mark"—and if she let
 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse
 —E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
 Never to stoop. Oh, Sir, she smiled, no doubt,
 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
 As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
 The company below, then. I repeat,
 The Count your master's known munificence
 Is ample warrant that no just pretense
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
 Though his fair daughter's self as I avowed
 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
 Together down, Sir! Notice Neptune, though,
 Taming a seahorse, thought a rarity,
 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.

Commentary on Browning's "My Last Duchess"

With its opening line, Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess" draws the reader into a narrative that bears all the usual marks of a murder mystery—a mystery that involves the

haughty Duke of Ferrara, an envoy present on behalf of a certain Count (the Duke's prospective father-in-law), a portrait painter from a religious order, and of course the Duke's "last Duchess." The time is the late Renaissance, when, for wealthy and cultivated men like the Duke, the pursuit of art has come to stand above several other human considerations. The place is the Duke's palace, which is probably filled with paintings and sculptures. That is, we may *suppose* his residence is heavily decorated with artworks because the Duke, as his discourse suggests, has a collector's penchant. At any rate, he seems to be a collector of wives. The word "last" in his statement "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall" causes one to ask what has happened to his wife, or for that matter to his previous wife or wives, since the word "last" implies that she was but one wife in a series. What is clear is that she is dead, which the second line, "Looking as if she were alive," indicates. The Duke's next statement, "I call / That piece a wonder, now," implies that his response to the portrait has changed over time. Just why he had different feelings about it earlier is another question. And indeed, it is the reader's attempt over the course of the poem to *answer* that question which reveals that this piece is less about the unfortunate Duchess than it is about the character of the Duke himself.

Following a pause in which he graciously invites the envoy to be seated, the Duke begins to fill in the details—*some* details. The portrait, he explains, was completed by Fra (Brother) Pandolph, a member of a religious brotherhood, whom the Duke had chosen to paint his wife's picture, presumably because, being celibate, he could be trusted with the Duchess. Even at that, however, the Duke wonders if the monk may have been rather too fresh with his subject. He imagines, for instance, that Fra Pandolph might have "chanced to say, 'Her mantle laps / Over my lady's wrist too much,'" the dubious monk's intention being to expose a bit more of his subject's flesh, or that he might have noted, "'Paint / Must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat'"; this sort of assertion by a supposedly religious man would surely mean that he was more interested in her sensual charm than her spiritual beauty. That the Duke also resented (and resents) the attentions of other men toward his wife is further suggested in key indicators of his arrogance and possessiveness—for instance, "since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I," "if they durst [dare to]," "The bough of cherries some officious fool / Broke in the orchard for her," "as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift," "I choose / Never to stoop," and "Nay, we'll go / Together down, Sir!" This final sharp imperative is a sign that the Duke will not even trust the envoy to be alone with the portrait of his "last Duchess."

But of course, such brusqueness and bravado does not betoken strength. On the contrary, it reveals a frail sense of self-worth—just as shows of jealousy and mistrust also reveal not love for another but lack of love for oneself. And plainly, the Duke is a jealous man, as is obvious in his responses to his former wife. Anything that could make her happy would have been reason for him to suppose that she was scanting him. According to him, she had "a heart . . . too soon made glad." Well, what should we make of that? That she was a treacherous cuckold alert always to a chance to deceive her husband? Not likely. More probable it is that indeed she *was* easily made glad, a woman naturally curious and alert always to the delights of life such as sunsets, cherries, and rides on a white mule. As well, we have reason to think her a generous and thankful soul, expressions of which the Duke of Self-Doubt would take only for betrayals should they be offered to any but him. And what's a man to do with a wife like that? Clearly he must dispose of her. This seems, anyway, to have been the Duke's solution. He hints ominously at it when he tells of her incorrigible smiling, smiling that was not checked by his commands and so had to be "stopped." The reader may hesitate to say that the Duke's statement "Then all smiles stopped together" is an example of euphemism, a mild substitute for something like *And then I killed her*. For the Duke's phrasing is so heartlessly cold and terse, one can scarcely hear it as a polite rephrasing of something more vulgar. It is vulgar enough as is.

Truly, it is properly vulgar, coming as it does from so proper a villain as the Duke—this refined man who commands his guest to notice in passing a lovely artwork, a bronze of Neptune taming a seahorse. Such a mighty god, that can master a creature so innocent and slight.

Come live with me and be my love
And we will all the pleasures prove¹
Of a marriage conducted with economy
In the Twentieth Century Anno Donomy.
We'll live in a dear little walk-up flat
With practically room to swing a cat
And a potted cactus to give it hauteur
And a bathtub equipped with dark brown water.
We'll eat, without undue discouragement,
Foods low in cost but high in nouragement
And quaff with pleasure, while chatting wittily,
The peculiar wine of Little Italy.
We'll remind each other it's smart to be thrifty
And buy our clothes for something-fifty.
We'll stand in line on holidays
For seats at unpopular matinees,
And every Sunday we'll have a lark
And take a walk in Central Park.
And one of these days not too remote
I'll probably up and cut your throat.

¹ **Come live with me and be my love / And we will all the pleasures prove:** These famous lines are not Nash's. He has borrowed them (note that this is a case of *allusion*, not plagiarism) from the English Renaissance poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe's poem "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," in which the lines originated, is shown below. Following that is a kind of rebuttal to the poem, "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," which is by one of Marlowe's contemporaries, Walter Raleigh.

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love
Christopher Marlowe

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies;
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle.

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold.

A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs;
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

The shepherd swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May morning;
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love.

The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd
Sir Walter Raleigh

If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move
To live with thee and be thy love.

Time drives the flocks from field to fold
When rivers rage and rocks grow cold,
And Philomel becometh dumb;
The rest complains of cares to come.

The flowers do fade, and wanton fields
To wayward winter reckoning yields;
A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall.

Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of roses,
Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies
Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten –
In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

Thy belt of straw and ivy buds,
Thy coral clasps and amber studs,
All these in me no means can move
To come to thee and be thy love.

But could youth last and love still breed,
Had joys no date nor age no need,
Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee and be thy love.