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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Biographical Criticism and the Speaker of a Poem

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “Oh Lovely Rock”

Precipice, n.

A sheer, steep cliff

Felt, v.

To mat or press together

Attrition, n.

A wearing down or away
by friction

When we read Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, we know we are encountering the poet himself. Likewise, when Emily Dickinson says of a poem, “This is my letter to the world,” we can surmise she is expressing her own thoughts. In such instances, one key to understanding an author’s work lies in understanding the author’s life. Many of Jeffers’s poems contain autobiographical elements as well. In “Night Without Sleep” Jeffers presumably shares his own experience, and in “The Day Is a Poem” he refers to himself directly.

Biographical criticism considers the ways age, race, gender, family, education, and economic status inform poetry. A critic might also examine how the poem reflects personality characteristics, life experiences, and psychological dynamics. These critics need to be careful, however, because poets often invent characters, adopt personas, and speak through narrative voices not their own.

?? Discussion Activities

The speaker of “The Stone Axe” is not Jeffers. The speaker of “Oh Lovely Rock,” on the other hand, is Jeffers. Though Jeffers himself appears as the “I” in only one of the poems, both contain biographical information about him. Ask students to discuss what the poems reveal about Jeffers’s beliefs, values, and personality. Identify the clues provided in each poem that help determine the narrative point of view.

Writing Exercise

The stone in “The Stone Axe” is small enough to be held in the hand; the rock in “Oh Lovely Rock” is as large as a mountainside. Despite this difference in size, the two entities have something in common: what? Have students write a one-page essay that considers this question, explaining the ways in which the understanding of this similarity brings a clearer view of Jeffers’s life, beliefs, and poetry.

Homework

Read “Inscription for a Gravestone” and “The Deer Lay Down Their Bones.” What words or images does Jeffers use to describe the cycle of life and death? What do you notice about the words and tone he uses to describe the cycle of life and death?