Semester Two: Introduction to Literature – (Poetry and Drama)

Unit 1:
Section A: Types of Verse: Lyric, Elegy, Dramatic Monologue, Sonnet, Ballad, Epic, Satire, Ode
Section B: Types of Drama: Tragedy, Comedy, Farce, Melodrama, Verse Drama, Theatre of Absurd, Angry Young Man Drama

Unit 2: Poetry:
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Satire: Oliver Goldsmith: “Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog”
Ode: Keats: “Ode on a Grecian Urn”
Ballad: Thomas Campbell: “Lord Ullin’s Daughter”
Dramatic Monologue: Robert Browning: “The Last Ride”
Lyric: Robert Frost: “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”

Unit 3: Play:
William Shakespeare: Twelfth Night
OR
Robert Bolt: A Man for All Seasons

Types of Drama
Tragedy

Tragedy is a form of drama based on human suffering that invokes in its audience an accompanying catharsis or pleasure in the viewing. While many cultures have developed forms that provoke this paradoxical response, tragedy often refers to a specific tradition of drama that has played a unique and important role historically in the self-definition of Western civilization. That tradition has been multiple and discontinuous, yet the term has often been used to invoke a powerful effect of cultural identity and historical continuity—"the Greeks and the Elizabethans, in one cultural form; Hellenes and Christians, in a common activity," as Raymond Williams puts it. From its obscure origins in the theaters of Athens 2,500 years ago, from which there survives only a fraction of the work of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, through its singular articulations in the works of Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Racine, and Schiller, to the more recent naturalistic tragedy of Strindberg, Beckett’s modernist meditations on death, loss and suffering, and Muller’s postmodernist reworkings of the tragic canon, tragedy has remained an important site of cultural experimentation, negotiation, struggle, and change. A long line of philosophers—which includes Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Voltaire, Hume, Diderot, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin, Camus, Lacan, and Deleuze—have analysed, speculated upon, and criticised the tragic form. In the wake of Aristotle’s Poetics (335 BCE), tragedy has been used to make genre distinctions, whether at the scale of poetry in general (where the tragic divides against epic and lyric) or at the scale of the drama (where tragedy is opposed to comedy). In the modern era, tragedy has also been defined against drama, melodrama, the tragicomic, and epic theatre.
The word "tragedy" appears to have been used to describe different phenomena at different times. It derives from (Classical Greek, contracted from trag(o)-aoidiā = "goat song", which comes from tragos = "he-goat" and aидеин = "to sing" (cf. "ode"). Scholars suspect this may be traced to a time when a goat was either the prize in a competition of choral dancing or was that around which a chorus danced prior to the animal’s ritual sacrifice. In another view on the etymology, Athenaeus of Naucratis (2nd–3rd century CE) says that the original form of the word was trygodia from trygos (grape harvest) and ode (song), because those events were first introduced during grape harvest.

Writing in 335 BCE (long after the Golden Age of 5th-century Athenian tragedy), Aristotle provides the earliest-surviving explanation for the origin of the dramatic art-form in his Poetics, in which he argues that tragedy developed from the improvisations of the leader of choral dithyrambs (hymns sung and danced in praise of Dionysos, the god of wine and fertility) Anyway, arising from an improvisatory beginning (both tragedy and comedy—tragedy from the leaders of the dithyramb, and comedy from the leaders of the phallic processions which even now continue as a custom in many of our cities), [tragedy] grew little by little, as [the poets] developed whatever [new part] of it had appeared; and, passing through many changes, tragedy came to a halt, since it had attained its own nature. Poetics IV, 1449a 10-15

In the same work, Aristotle attempts to provide a scholastic definition of what tragedy is:
Tragedy is, then, an enactment of a deed that is important and complete, and of [a certain] magnitude, by means of language enriched [with ornaments], each used separately in the different parts [of the play]: it is enacted, not [merely] recited, and through pity and fear it effects relief (catharsis) to such [and similar] emotions. Poetics, VI 1449b 2-3

There is some dissent to the dithyrambic origins of tragedy, mostly based on the differences between the shapes of their choruses and styles of dancing. A common descent from pre- Hellenic fertility and burial rites has been suggested.

Nietzsche discussed the origins of Greek tragedy in his early book, The Birth of Tragedy (1872).

In the English language, the most famous and most successful tragedies are those by William Shakespeare and his Elizabethan contemporaries. Shakespeare’s tragedies include:
Antony and Cleopatra
Coriolanus
Hamlet
Julius Caesar
King Lear
Macbeth
Othello
Romeo and Juliet
Timon of Athens
Titus Andronicus
A contemporary of Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, also wrote examples of tragedy in English, notably:
The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus
Tamburlaine
John Webster also wrote famous plays of the genre: The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil

**Modern development**

In modernist literature, the definition of tragedy has become less precise. The most fundamental change has been the rejection of Aristotle’s dictum that true tragedy can only depict those with power and high status. Arthur Miller’s essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1949) argues that tragedy may also depict ordinary people in domestic surroundings. British playwright Howard Barker has argued strenuously for the rebirth of tragedy in the contemporary theatre, most notably in his volume Arguments for a Theatre. "You emerge from tragedy equipped against lies. After the musical, you're anybody's fool," he insists.

**Comedy**

The word "comedy" is derived from the Classical Greek which is a compound either of komos (revel) or (village) an (singing); it is possible that komos itself is derived from revel, and originally meant a village revel. The adjective "comic" (Greek revel komikos), which strictly means that which relates to comedy is, in modern usage, generally confined to the sense of "laughter-provoking". Of this, the word came into modern usage through the Latin, through Italian, and has, over time, passed through various shades of meaning.

(from the Greek: komoidia), as a popular meaning, is any humorous discourse or work generally intended to amuse by creating laughter, especially in television, film, and stand-up comedy. This must be carefully distinguished from its academic definition, namely the comic theatre, whose Western origins are found in Ancient Greece. In the Athenian democracy, the public opinion of voters was remarkably influenced by the political satire performed by the comic poets at the theaters. The theatrical genre can be simply described as a dramatic performance which pits two societies against each other in an amusing agon or conflict. Northrop Frye famously depicted these two opposing sides as a "Society of Youth" and a "Society of the Old", but this dichotomy is seldom described as an entirely satisfactory explanation. A later view characterizes the essential agon of comedy as a struggle between a relatively powerless youth and the societal conventions that pose obstacles to his hopes; in this sense, the youth is understood to be constrained by his lack of social authority, and is left with little choice but to take recourse to ruses which engender very dramatic irony which provokes laughter.

Satire and political satire use ironic comedy to portray persons or social institutions as ridiculous or corrupt, thus alienating their audience from the object of humor. Satire is a type of comedy. Parody borrows the form of some popular genre, artwork, or text but uses certain ironic changes to critique that form from within (though not necessarily in a condemning way). Screwball comedy derives its humor largely from bizarre, surprising (and improbable) situations or characters. Black comedy is defined by dark humor that makes light of so called dark or evil elements in human nature. Similarly scatological
humor, sexual humor, and race humor create comedy by violating social conventions or taboos in comic ways. A comedy of manners typically takes as its subject a particular part of society (usually upper class society) and uses humor to parody or satirize the behavior and mannerisms of its members. Romantic comedy is a popular genre that depicts burgeoning romance in humorous terms, and focuses on the foibles of those who are falling in love.

Farce

In theatre, a farce is a comedy which aims at entertaining the audience by means of unlikely, extravagant, and improbable situations, disguise and mistaken identity, verbal humor of varying degrees of sophistication, which may include word play, and a fast-paced plot whose speed usually increases, culminating in an ending which often involves an elaborate chase scene. Farces are often highly incomprehensible plot-wise (due to the large number of plot twists and random events that often occur), but viewers are encouraged not to try to follow the plot in order to avoid becoming confused and overwhelmed. Farce is also characterized by physical humor, the use of deliberate absurdity or nonsense, and broadly stylized performances. Farces have been written for the stage and film.

Melodrama

The term melodrama refers to a dramatic work that exaggerates plot and characters in order to appeal to the emotions. It may also refer to the genre which includes such works, or to language, behavior, or events which resemble them. It is usually based around having the same character traits, e.g. a hero (always the fearless one), heroine (the love of the hero, usually the one that the hero saves), villain (usually likes the heroine too) and villain's sidekick (typically gets in the way of the Villain). It is also used in scholarly and historical musical contexts to refer to dramas of the 18th and 19th centuries in which orchestral music or song was used to accompany the action. The term originated from the early 19th century French word *mélodrame*, which is derived from Greek *melos*, music, and French *drame*, drama (from Late Latin *drâma*, which in turn derives from Greek *drān*, to do, perform) An alternative English spelling, now obsolete, is "melodrame".

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18th-century origins: monodrama, duodrama and opera

Beginning in the 18th century, melodrama was a technique of combining spoken recitation with short pieces of accompanying music. In such works, music and spoken dialog typically alternated, although the music was sometimes also used to accompany pantomime. The earliest known examples are scenes in J. E. Eberlin's Latin school play *Sigismundus* (1753). The first full melodrama was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Pygmalion*, the text of which was written in 1762 but was first staged in Lyon in 1770. The overture and an Andante were composed by Rousseau, but the bulk of the music was composed by Horace Coignet. A different musical setting of
Rousseau's *Pygmalion* by Anton Schweitzer was performed in Weimar in 1772, and Goethe wrote of it approvingly in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. *Pygmalion* is a monodrama, written for one actor. Some 30 other monodramas were produced in Germany in the fourth quarter of the 18th century. When two actors are involved the term duodrama may be used. Georg Benda was particularly successful with his duodramas *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1775) and *Medea* (1778). The sensational success of Benda’s melodramas led Mozart to use two long melodramatic monologues in his opera *Zaide* (1780). Other later, and better-known examples of the melodramatic style in operas are the grave-digging scene in Beethoven’s *Fidelio* (1805) and the incantation scene in Weber’s *Der Freischütz* (1821).

**19th century: operetta, incidental music and salon entertainment**

A few operettas exhibit melodrama in the sense of music played under spoken dialogue, for instance, Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Ruddigore* (itself a parody of melodramas in the modern sense) has a short “melodrame” (reduced to dialogue alone in many productions) in the second act; Jacques Offenbach’s *Orpheus in the Underworld* opens with a melodrama delivered by the character of "Public Opinion"; and other pieces from operetta and musicals may be considered melodramas, such as the "Recit and Minuet" in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Sorcerer*. As an example from the American musical, several long speeches in Lerner and Loewe’s *Brigadoon* are delivered over an accompaniment of evocative music. The technique is also frequently used in Spanish zarzuela, both in the 19th and 20th centuries, and continued also to be used as a "special effect" in opera, for instance Richard Strauss’s *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.

In a similar manner, Victorians often added "incidental music" under the dialogue to a pre-existing play, although this style of composition was already practiced in the days of Ludwig van Beethoven (*Egmont*) and Franz Schubert (*Rosamunde*). (This type of often-lavish production is now mostly limited to film (see film score) due to the cost of hiring an orchestra. Modern recording technology is producing a certain revival of the practice in theatre, but not on the former scale.) A particularly complete version of this form, Sullivan’s incidental music to Tennyson’s *The Foresters* is available online, complete with several melodramas, for instance, No. 12 found here.

**Verse drama**

Verse drama is any drama written as verse to be spoken; another possible general term is poetic drama. For a very long period, verse drama was the dominant form of drama in Europe (and was also important in non-European cultures). Greek tragedy and Racine’s plays are written in verse, as is almost all of Shakespeare’s drama, Ben Jonson, Fletcher and others like Goethe’s *Faust*.

Verse drama is particularly associated with the seriousness of tragedy, providing an artistic reason to write in this form, as well as the practical one that verse lines are easier for the actors to memorize exactly. In the second half of the twentieth century verse drama fell almost completely out of fashion with dramatists writing in English (the plays of Christopher Fry and T. S. Eliot being possibly the end of a long tradition).

Dramatic verse occurs in a dramatic work, such as a play, composed in poetic form. The tradition of dramatic verse extends a least as far back as ancient Greece. It was probably used by Greek playwrights such as Euripides for incantatory effect and to make long passages easier to memorize.
The English Renaissance saw the height of dramatic verse in the English-speaking world, with playwrights such as Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare developing new techniques, both for dramatic structure and poetic form. Though a few plays, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, feature extended passages of rhymed verse, the majority of dramatic verse is composed as blank verse; there are also passages of prose.

Dramatic verse began to decline in popularity in the nineteenth century, when the prosaic and conversational styles of playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen became more prevalent, and were adapted in English by George Bernard Shaw. Verse drama did have a role in the development of Irish theatre.

For many centuries from the Greeks onwards verse was, throughout Europe, the natural and almost exclusive medium for the composition and presentation of dramatic works with any pretensions to seriousness or the status of art. Western drama's twin origins, in the Greek Festivals and in the rituals of the medieval church, naturally predisposed it to the use of verse. For tragedy verse long remained the only proper vehicle. In comedy the use of prose became increasingly common - giving rise, for example, to such interesting cases as Ariosto's *I suppositi*, written in prose in 1509 and reworked twenty years later in verse. Shakespeare's use of prose in comic scenes, especially those of low life, and for effective contrast in certain scenes of the tragedies and history plays, shows an increasing awareness of the possibilities of the medium and perhaps already contains an implicit association between prose and realism.

Verse continued to be the dominant medium of tragedy throughout the seventeenth century – even domestic tragedies such as *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (Anon., 1608) or Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed With Kindness* (1603) were composed in blank verse. For all the continuing use of verse it is hard to escape the feeling that by the end of the seventeenth century it had largely ceased to be a genuinely living medium for dramatists. Increasingly the prevailing idioms of dramatic verse became decidedly literary, owing more to the work of earlier dramatists than to any real relationship with the language of its own time. By 1731 George Lillo's *The London Merchant*, or *The History of George Barnwell*, for all its clumsiness and limitations, in its presentation of a middle-class tragedy in generally effective prose achieved a theatrical liveliness and plausibility largely absent from contemporary verse tragedies - from Addison's *Cato* (1713), Thomson's *Sophonisba* (1730) and *Agamemnon* (1738), or Johnson's *Irene* (1749). The example of Racine was vital to such plays, but it was not one that proved very fertile. Lillo was praised in France by Diderot and Marmontel, in Germany by Lessing and Goethe. It is not unreasonable to see Lillo's work as an early and clumsy anticipation of Ibsen's. The London Merchant constitutes one indication of the effective death of verse drama. Others are not far to seek. In France, Houdar de La Motte was also writing prose tragedies in the 1720's, and Stendhal, in the 1820's was insistent that prose was now the only possible medium for a viable tragedy. Ibsen largely abandoned verse after *Peer Gynt* (1867), in favor of prose plays more directly and realistically concerned with contemporary issues. A well-known letter to Lucie Wolf (25 May 1883) proclaims that Verse has been most injurious to the art of drama... It is improbable that verse will be employed to any extent worth mentioning in the drama of the immediate future since the aims of the dramatists of the future are almost certain to be incompatible with it.

**Sonnet 1**

*From fairest creatures we desire increase,*  
*That thereby beauty's rose might never die,*
But as the riper should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory:
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed’st thy light’st flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.
Thou that art now the world’s fresh ornament
And only herald to the gaudy spring,
Within thine own bud buriest thy content
And, tender churl, makest waste in niggarding.
   Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
   To eat the world’s due, by the grave and thee.

**Summary: Sonnet 1**

The first sonnet takes it as a given that “From fairest creatures we desire increase”—that is, that we desire beautiful creatures to multiply, in order to preserve their “beauty’s rose” for the world. That way, when the parent dies (“as the riper should by time decease”), the child might continue its beauty (“His tender heir might bear his memory”). In the second quatrain, the speaker chides the young man he loves for being too self-absorbed to think of procreation: he is “contracted” to his own “bright eyes,” and feeds his light with the fuel of his own loveliness. The speaker says that this makes the young man his own unwitting enemy, for it makes “a famine where abundance lies,” and hoards all the young man’s beauty for himself. In the third quatrain, he argues that the young man may now be beautiful—he is “the world’s fresh ornament / And only herald to the gaudy spring”—but that, in time, his beauty will fade, and he will bury his “content” within his flower’s own bud (that is, he will not pass his beauty on; it will wither with him). In the couplet, the speaker asks the young man to “pity the world” and reproduce, or else be a glutton who, like the grave, eats the beauty he owes to the whole world.
Commentary
The first sonnet introduces many of the themes that will define the sequence: beauty, the passage of human life in time, the ideas of virtue and wasteful self-consumption (“thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes”), and the love the speaker bears for the young man, which causes him to elevate the young man above the whole world, and to consider his procreation a form of “pity” for the rest of the earth. Sonnet 1 opens not only the entire sequence of sonnets, but also the first mini-sequence, a group comprising the first seventeen sonnets, often called the “procreation” sonnets because they each urge the young man to bear children as an act of defiance against time.

The logical structure of Sonnet 1 is relatively simple: the first quatrain states the moral premise, that beauty should strive to propagate itself; the second quatrain accuses the young man of violating that moral premise, by wasting his beauty on himself alone; the third quatrain gives him an urgent reason to change his ways and obey the moral premise, because otherwise his beauty will wither and disappear; and the couplet summarizes the argument with a new exhortation to “pity the world” and father a child. Some of the metaphoric images in the poem, however, are quite complex. The image of the young man contracted to his own bright eyes, feeding his “light’s flame” with “self-substantial fuel,” for instance, is an extremely intricate image of self-absorption, and looks forward to the final image of Sonnet 73, in which old age is depicted as the snuffing of a fire by the ashes of the wood it was once “nourished by” — almost its self-substantial fuel.

Oliver Goldsmith, "An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog" (1766)

Good people all, of every sort,
Give ear unto my song;
And if you find it wondrous short,
It cannot hold you long.
In Islington there was a man,
Of whom the world might say
That still a godly race he ran,
Whene'er he went to pray.
A kind and gentle heart he had,
To comfort friends and foes;
The naked every day he clad,
When he put on his clothes.
And in that town a dog was found,
As many dogs there be,
Both mongrel, puppy, whelp and hound,
And curs of low degree.
This dog and man at first were friends;
But when a pique began,
The dog, to gain some private ends,
Went mad and bit the man.
Around from all the neighbouring streets
The wondering neighbours ran,
And swore the dog had lost his wits,
To bite so good a man.
The wound it seemed both sore and sad
To every Christian eye;
And while they swore the dog was mad,
They swore the man would die.
But soon a wonder came to light,
That showed the rogues they lied:
The man recovered of the bite,
The dog it was that died.

In "An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog", Oliver Goldsmith means that the narrator of the poem covers the naked, poor, and destitute of the town with his caring concern, when he writes that "the naked every day he clad, when he put on his clothes". Oliver Goldsmith highlights that the man from Islington is a godly, praying, good man. This man has a "kind and gentle heart." This is the essence of this man - what he is. Therefore, with this personality imbued with these inner spiritual qualities, this man is a comfort to his friends and enemies alike. That's why he is able to clothe the naked that he meets. A reader can see a duality in the lines "the naked every day he clad, when he put on his clothes". This man may actually provide the physical clothing that the poor need to survive in a harsh and sometimes unforgiving world. So the reader can take this line literally. However, there is a deeper and secondary meaning to these lines. The community where the man lives sees him as a caring and compassionate individual. That's why they believe the dog "lost his wits" when he bit the man. The citizenry wonders how anything living - man, woman, or beast - could want to harm this sincere, caring, kind person. So, the townsfolk have a high regard for this man. Fundamentally, this man clothes the people he meets with love. His outgoing concern for others is a blessing to people he meets, no matter their standing and station in society. He is like a protective covering, so-to-speak, to these people, who must feel that life can be a bit easier after they have an encounter with this man. It is obvious that he's an inspiration to people and helps lighten the burdens of life that people carry on a daily basis.
Ode : Keats : “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a poem written by the English Romantic poet John Keats in May 1819 and published anonymously in the January 1820, Number 15, issue of the magazine Annals of the Fine Arts (see 1820 in poetry).

The poem is one of several "Great Odes of 1819", which includes "Ode on Indolence", "Ode on Melancholy", "Ode to a Nightingale", and "Ode to Psyche". Keats found earlier forms of poetry unsatisfactory for his purpose, and the collection represented a new development of the ode form. He was inspired to write the poem after reading two articles by English artist and writer Benjamin Haydon. Keats was aware of other works on classical Greek art, and had first-hand exposure to the Elgin Marbles, all of which reinforced his belief that classical Greek art was idealistic and captured Greek virtues, which forms the basis of the poem.

Divided into five stanzas of ten lines each, the ode contains a narrator's discourse on a series of designs on a Grecian urn. The poem focuses on two scenes: one in which a lover eternally pursues a beloved without fulfilment, and another of villagers about to perform a sacrifice. The final lines of the poem declare that “'beauty is truth, truth beauty,' – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”, and literary critics have debated whether they increase or diminish the overall beauty of the poem. Critics have focused on other aspects of the poem, including the role of the narrator, the inspirational qualities of real-world objects, and the paradoxical relationship between the poem's world and reality.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" was not well received by contemporary critics. It was only by the mid-19th century that it began to be praised, although it is now considered to be one of the greatest odes in the English language. A long debate over the poem's final statement divided 20th-century critics, but most agreed on the beauty of the work, despite various perceived inadequacies.

The poem begins with the narrator's silencing the urn by describing it as the "bride of quietness", which allows him to speak for it using his own impressions. The narrator addresses the urn by saying:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness!
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time (lines 1–2)

The urn is a "foster-child of silence and slow time" because it was created from stone and made by the hand of an artist who did not communicate through words. As stone, time has little effect on it and ageing is such a slow process that it can be seen as an eternal piece of artwork. The urn is an external object capable of producing a story outside the time of its creation, and because of this ability the poet labels it a "sylvan historian" that tells its story through its beauty:

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flow'ry tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (lines 3–10)

The questions presented in these lines are too ambiguous to allow the reader to understand what is taking place in the images on the urn, but elements of it are revealed: there is a pursuit with a strong sexual component. The melody accompanying the pursuit is intensified in the second stanza:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone: (lines 11–14)

There is a hint of a paradox in that indulgence causes someone to be filled with desire and that music without a sound is desired by the soul. There is a stasis that prohibits the characters on the urn from ever being fulfilled:

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (lines 17–20)

In the third stanza, the narrator begins by speaking to a tree, which will ever hold its leaves and will not "bid the Spring adieu". The paradox of life versus lifelessness extends beyond the lover and the fair lady and takes a more temporal shape as three of the ten lines begin with the words "for ever". The unheard song never ages and the pipes are able to play forever, which leads the lovers, nature, and all involved to be:

For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue. (lines 27–30)

A new paradox arises in these lines because these immortal lovers are experiencing a living death. To overcome this paradox of merged life and death, the poem shifts to a new scene with a new perspective. The fourth stanza opens with the sacrifice of a virgin cow, an image that appeared in the Elgin Marbles, Claude Lorrain's *Sacrifice to Apollo*, and Raphael's *The Sacrifice at Lystra*

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. (lines 31–40)

All that exists in the scene is a procession of individuals, and the narrator conjectures on the rest. The altar and town exist as part of a world outside art, and the poem challenges the limitations of art through describing their possible existence. The questions are unanswered because there is no one who can ever know the true answers, as the locations are not real. The final stanza begins with a reminder that the urn is a piece of eternal artwork:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold pastoral! (lines 41–45)

The audience is limited in its ability to comprehend the eternal scene, but the silent urn is still able to speak to them. The story it tells is both cold and passionate, and it is able to help mankind. The poem concludes with the urn's message:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou sayst,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (lines 46–50)

**Ballad: Thomas Campbell: “Lord Ullin’s Daughter”**

A Chieftan to the Highlands bound,
Cries, 'Boatman, do not tarry;
And I'll give thee a silver pound
To row us o'er the ferry.'
'Now who be ye would cross Lochgyle, 
This dark and stormy water?'
'Oh! I'm the chief of Ulva's isle, 
And this Lord Ullin's daughter.
'And fast before her father's men 
Three days we've fled together, 
For should he find us in the glen, 
My blood would stain the heather.
'His horsemen hard behind us ride; 
Should they our steps discover, 
Then who will cheer my bonny bride 
When they have slain her lover?'
Outspoke the hardy Highland wight:
'I'll go, my chief - I'm ready: 
It is not for your silver bright, 
But for your winsome lady.
'And by my word, the bonny bird 
In danger shall not tarry: 
So, though the waves are raging white, 
I'll row you o'er the ferry.'
By this the storm grew loud apace, 
The water-wraith was shrieking; 
And in the scowl of heaven each face 
Grew dark as they were speaking. 
But still, as wilder blew the wind, 
And as the night grew drearer, 
Adown the glen rode armed men- 
Their trampling sounded nearer.
'Oh! Haste thee, haste!' the lady cries,
'Though tempests round us gather;
I'll meet the raging of the skies,
But not an angry father.'
The boat has left a stormy land,
A stormy sea before her-
When oh! Too strong for human hand,
The tempest gathered o'er her.
And still they rowed amidst the roar
Of waters fast prevailing;
Lord Ullin reach'd that fatal shore-
His wrath was chang'd to wailing.
For sore dismay'd, through storm and shade,
His child he did discover;
One lovely hand she stretch'd for aid,
And one was round her lover.
'Come back! Come back!' he cried in grief,
'Across this stormy water;
And I'll forgive your Highland chief,
My daughter!- oh, my daughter!'
'Twas vain: the loud waves lash'd the shore,
Return or aid preventing;
The waters wild went o'er his child,
And he was left lamenting.

Thomas Campbell (1777-1844) is remarkable for his sentimental poetry. Most of his poems deal with common human problems.

Poem in Brief:
“Lord Ullin's Daughter” is a ballad which tells the tragic story of the daughter of Lord Ullin and her lover who die a very sorrowful death when chased by her father and his men. The poem begins with the daughter and her lover, the Scottish chieftain arriving at the banks of Lochgyle with the intention of eloping to a safer place. The lover offers the boatman a silver
pound to cross them to safety. The weather is stormy and it is very dangerous to cross the Lochgyle in such a state. The lover introduces himself as the chief of Ulva and that he is running from Lord Ullin’s men. He tells the boatman that if the Lord’s men catch him eloping with her daughter, they would immediately slay him. The boatman hesitates because agreeing can cost him all of the three lives. Then the beautiful daughter of Lord Ullin pleads to the boatman; she says that she is ready to face the raging storm but not her angry father. Finally, the boatman agrees to take them across Lochgyle.

The boat has left the shore when Lord Ullin and his men reach. Lord Ullin’s anger evaporates at the moment when he sees his darling daughter fighting with Nature’s fury on the sea. His heart melts and he cries out to her to return and that he would accept her lover. But it is too late and before the Lord could do anything, the little boat capsizes and the three of them are drowned in the turbulent waters of Lochgyle.

**Dramatic Monologue: Robert Browning : “The Last Ride” 4**

*The Last Ride Together* is one of Robert Browning’s most notable dramatic monologues. It focuses on the wishes of a man for a last ride together with his lover and this journey is both passionate and evocative.

First published in 1855 in the book *Men and Women*, it has received much attention over the years, especially with the regards to the possible psycho-sexual content. Some critics see Freudian symbols within the poem, the title in particular interpreted as a metaphor for the sexual act.

- This is debateable but does open up discussion which could lead to a greater understanding of this classical poem. Suffice to say, as the poem progresses it does become clear that this is no ordinary horse ride through gentle countryside. This is a journey that takes place in heart and mind. Browning taps into the mindset of the modern man.

In the end the speaker wishes for the journey to never end, to carry on in some eternal instant. For Victorian readers this was cutting edge romantic material - how could a rejected lover carry on so, and be such a complicated soul?

Robert Browning and his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning were the most famous poetic couple of the age. Their publications became very popular and their life as lover-poets was well known. They also traveled a lot and it was on one of these journeys that Robert Browning perhaps echoed the sentiments of *The Last Ride Together*.

In a letter of 1858 Elizabeth wrote to one Isa Blagden following their pleasant journey from Florence to Paris *'I was nearly sorry to arrive, & Robert suggested the facility of travelling on for ever so.'*

*The Last Ride Together* encapsulates Browning’s principal philosophies - life is always greater than art and love is the best thing life can bring. Experience here on earth is the ultimate and one doesn’t have to wait for heaven to have a blissful life in the here and now.

**The Last Ride Together - Read Through**

Although the majority of the poem is in first person mode, starting with *I said*, watch out for subtle changes as the stanzas progress. The second person pronoun enters the scene, *you*, then again moving onto *we*, a natural progression as the couple unite.

**Enjambment** - when a line has no punctuation at the end and flows into the next - and the iambic tetrameter, help keep the poem moving forward whilst the odd line with an extra beat, a ninth syllable, remind the reader that this is no clockwork relationship, but can change.

The use of dashes here and there, together with more formal punctuation, help keep the syntax challenging. Each stanza has its own character but watch out in particular for stanzas II, VII and VIII, which require extra work with rhythm and meaning.

This is a demanding poem to read, what with that mysterious fifth and eleventh line rhyme confusing matters, the 8,9 and 10 lines all rhyming, and the subtle change in metrics with lines 10 and 11. Whilst helping to bond and bind certain sections of the poem, these rhymes reflect a complex mindset - the man is torn between accepting his fate as a failed lover, yet wishes for that eternal moment of continuous union with his her.
To help put his plight into context he thinks about art and work and how men strive for some kind of perfection, never quite attaining the heights. And fate - no one can know what lies ahead, so best to live life and love in the here and now, hoping it can last forever.

**The Last Ride Together**

I
I said—Then, dearest, since 'tis so,
Since now at length my fate I know,
Since nothing all my love avails,
Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,
Since this was written and needs must be—
My whole heart rises up to bless
Your name in pride and thankfulness!
Take back the hope you gave,—I claim
Only a memory of the same,
—And this beside, if you will not blame,
Your leave for one more last ride with me.

II
My mistress bent that brow of hers;
Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs
When pity would be softening through,
Fixed me a breathing-while or two
With life or death in the balance: right!
The blood replenished me again;
My last thought was at least not vain:
I and my mistress, side by side
Shall be together, breathe and ride,
So, one day more am I deified.
Who knows but the world may end to-night?

III
Hush! if you saw some western cloud
All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed
By many benedictions—sun's
And moon's and evening-star's at once—
And so, you, looking and loving best,
Conscious grew, your passion drew
Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too,
Down on you, near and yet more near,
Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!—
Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear!
Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

IV
Then we began to ride. My soul
Smoothed itself out, a long-crammed scroll
Freshening and fluttering in the wind.
Past hopes already lay behind.
What need to strive with a life awry?
Had I said that, had I done this,
So might I gain, so might I miss.
Might she have loved me? just as well
She might have hated, who can tell!
Where had I been now if the worst befell?
And here we are riding, she and I.

V
Fail I alone, in words and deeds?
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?
We rode; it seemed my spirit flew,
Saw other regions, cities new.
As the world rushed by on either side.
I thought,—All labour, yet no less
Bear up beneath their unsuccess.
Look at the end of work, contrast
The petty done, the undone vast,
This present of theirs with the hopeful past!
I hoped she would love me; here we ride.

VI
What hand and brain went ever paired?
What heart alike conceived and dared?
What act proved all its thought had been?
What will but felt the fleshly screen?
We ride and I see her bosom heave.
There's many a crown for who can reach.
Ten lines, a statesman's life in each!
The flag stuck on a heap of bones,
A soldier's doing! what atones?
They scratch his name on the Abbey-stones.
My riding is better, by their leave.

VII
What does it all mean, poet? Well,
Your brains beat into rhythm, you tell
What we felt only; you expressed
You hold things beautiful the best,
And pace them in rhyme so, side by side.
"Tis something, nay 'tis much: but then,
Have you yourself what's best for men?
Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time—
Nearer one whit your own sublime
Than we who never have turned a rhyme?
Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.

VIII
And you, great sculptor—so, you gave
A score of years to Art, her slave,
And that's your Venus, whence we turn
To yonder girl that fords the burn!
You acquiesce, and shall I repine?
What, man of music, you grown grey
With notes and nothing else to say,
Is this your sole praise from a friend,
"Greatly his opera's strains intend,
Put in music we know how fashions end!"
I gave my youth; but we ride, in fine.

IX
Who knows what’s fit for us? Had fate
Proposed bliss here should sublimate
My being—had I signed the bond—
Still one must lead some life beyond,
Have a bliss to die with, dim-descried.
This foot once planted on the goal,
This glory-garland round my soul,
Could I descry such? Try and test!
I sink back shuddering from the quest.
Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?
Now, heaven and she are beyond this ride.
X
And yet—she has not spoke so long!
What if heaven be that, fair and strong
At life’s best, with our eyes upturned
Whither life’s flower is first discerned,
We, fixed so, ever should so abide?
What if we still ride on, we two
With life for ever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity.—
And heaven just prove that I and she
Ride, ride together, for ever ride?

**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
**Summary**
On the surface, this poem is simplicity itself. The speaker is stopping by some woods on a snowy evening. He or she takes in the lovely scene in near-silence, is tempted to stay longer, but acknowledges the pull of obligations and the considerable distance yet to be traveled before he or she can rest for the night.

**Form**
The poem consists of four (almost) identically constructed stanzas. Each line is iambic, with four stressed syllables:
Within the four lines of each stanza, the first, second, and fourth lines rhyme. The third line does not, but it sets up the rhymes for the next stanza. For example, in the third stanza, *queer, near,* and *year* all rhyme, but *lake* rhymes with *shake, mistake,* and *flake* in the following stanza.
The notable exception to this pattern comes in the final stanza, where the third line rhymes with the previous two and is repeated as the fourth line.
Do not be fooled by the simple words and the easiness of the rhymes; this is a very difficult form to achieve in English without debilitating a poem’s content with forced rhymes.

**Commentary**
This is a poem to be marveled at and taken for granted. Like a big stone, like a body of water, like a strong economy, however it was forged it seems that, once made, it has always been there. Frost claimed that he wrote it in a single nighttime sitting; it just came to him. Perhaps one hot, sustained burst is the only way to cast such a complete object, in which form and content, shape and meaning, are alloyed inextricably. One is tempted to read it, nod quietly in recognition of its splendor and multivalent meaning, and just move on. But one must write essays. Or study guides.

**William Shakespeare: Twelfth Night**
Viola and Sebastian, brother and sister twins who closely resemble each other, are separated when the ship on which they are passengers is wrecked during a great storm at sea. Each thinks that the other is dead and sets out alone with no hope of being reunited.
The lovely and charming Viola is cast upon the shores of Illyria, where she is befriended by a kind sea captain. They decide to dress Viola in men’s clothing and have her take service as a page in the household of young Duke Orsino. Dressed in man’s garb, Viola calls herself Cesario and becomes the duke’s personal attendant. Impressed by the youth’s good looks and pert but courtly speech, Orsino sends “him” as his envoy of love to woo the Countess Olivia, who is mourning the death of her young brother.

The wealthy Olivia lives in a splendid palace with her maid, Maria; her drunken old uncle, Sir Toby Belch; and her steward, Malvolio. Maria and Sir Toby are a happy-go-lucky pair who drink and carouse with Sir Andrew Aguecheek, an ancient nobleman who is much enamored of Olivia. In return for grog supplied by Sir Andrew, Sir Toby is supposed to press Sir Andrew’s suit with Olivia. Actually, however, Sir Toby never stays sober long enough to keep his part of the bargain.

All these affairs are observed disapprovingly by Malvolio, Olivia’s ambitious, narrow-minded steward, who cannot tolerate jollity in those about him.

When Cesario arrives at the palace, Olivia is instantly attracted to the page—thinking her a man. She pays close attention to Orsino’s message, but it is not love for Orsino that causes her to listen so carefully. When Cesario leaves, she sends Malvolio after her with a ring. It is a shock for Viola, who hitherto enjoys playing the part of Cesario, to realize that Olivia fell in love with her in her male clothes.

Meanwhile, Maria, Sir Toby, and Sir Andrew decide to stop Malvolio’s constant prying into their affairs and devise a scheme whereby Malvolio will find a note, supposedly written by Olivia, in which she confesses her secret love for him and asks him to wear garish yellow stockings tied with cross garters and to smile continually in her presence. Overjoyed to receive this note, Malvolio soon appears in his strange dress, capering and bowing before the startled countess. Olivia decides that Malvolio lost his wits; to the amusement of the three conspirators, she has him confined to a dark room.

As the days pass, Viola falls in love with the duke, but the latter has eyes only for Olivia, with whom he presses his page to renew his suit. When Cesario delivers another message from Orsino to Olivia, the countess openly declares her love for the young page. Cesario insists, however, that his heart can never belong to any woman. So obvious are Olivia’s feelings for Cesario that Sir Andrew becomes jealous. Sir Toby and Maria insist that Sir Andrew’s only course is to fight a duel with the page. Sir Toby delivers Sir Andrew’s blustering challenge, which Cesario reluctantly accepts.

While these events unfold, Viola’s twin brother, Sebastian, is being rescued by another sea captain, named Antonio, and the two become close friends. When Sebastian decides to visit the court of Duke Orsino at Illyria, Antonio decides to
accompany him, even though he fears that he might be arrested there because he once dueled with the duke. Upon arriving in Illyria, Antonio gives Sebastian his purse for safekeeping, and the two men separate for several hours.

While wandering about the city, Antonio chances upon the duel between Cesario and Sir Andrew. Mistaking the disguised page for her brother, Antonio immediately goes to the rescue of his supposed friend. When officers arrive on the scene, one of them recognizes Antonio and arrests him in the name of the duke. Thinking that Viola is Sebastian, Antonio asks her to return his purse and is surprised and hurt when she disclaims all knowledge of the captain’s money. As Antonio is dragged away, he shouts invectives at “Sebastian” for not returning his purse, thereby alerting Viola to the fact that her brother is still alive.

Meanwhile, the real Sebastian is being followed by Sir Andrew, who never dreamed that this young man is not the same Cesario with whom he just dueled. Prodded by Sir Toby and Maria, Sir Andrew engages Sebastian in a new duel and is promptly wounded, along with Sir Toby. Olivia then interferes and has Sebastian taken to her home, thinking that he is Cesario. After sending for a priest, she marries the surprised—but not unwilling—Sebastian.

As the officers escort Antonio past Olivia’s house, Orsino—accompanied by Cesario—appears at her gates. Orsino recognizes Antonio instantly and demands to know why the sailor returned to Illyria—a city filled with his enemies. Antonio explains that he rescued and befriended the duke’s present companion, Sebastian, and because of his deep friendship for the lad accompanied him to Illyria despite the danger his visit involves. Pointing to Cesario, he sorrowfully accuses the person he supposes to be Sebastian of violating their friendship by not returning his purse.

The duke is protesting against Antonio’s accusation when Olivia appears and salutes Cesario as her husband. Now the duke also begins to think his page ungrateful, especially since he told Cesario to press his own suit with Olivia. Just then Sir Andrew and Sir Toby arrive, looking for a doctor because Sebastian wounded them. Seeing Cesario, Sir Andrew begins to rail at him for his violence until Olivia dismisses the two old men. The real Sebastian then appears and apologizes for having wounded the old men.

Spying Antonio, Sebastian joyfully greets his friend. Antonio and the rest of the amazed group, unable to believe what they see, stare from Cesario to Sebastian. After Viola reveals her true identity and explains how she and her brother became separated, she and Sebastian greet each other warmly. Seeing that the page of whom he grew so fond is a woman, Duke Orsino declares that he will marry her.

After Malvolio is summoned, the plot against him is revealed. As he storms off, vowing revenge, the others begin celebrating the impending marriages of Viola
and Orsino and of Sir Toby and Maria. Only Malvolio, unhappy in the happiness of others, remains peevish and disgruntled.

**Plot Overview**

In the kingdom of Illyria, a nobleman named Orsino lies around listening to music, pining away for the love of Lady Olivia. He cannot have her because she is in mourning for her dead brother and refuses to entertain any proposals of marriage. Meanwhile, off the coast, a storm has caused a terrible shipwreck. A young, aristocratic-born woman named Viola is swept onto the Illyrian shore. Finding herself alone in a strange land, she assumes that her twin brother, Sebastian, has been drowned in the wreck, and tries to figure out what sort of work she can do. A friendly sea captain tells her about Orsino’s courtship of Olivia, and Viola says that she wishes she could go to work in Olivia’s home. But since Lady Olivia refuses to talk with any strangers, Viola decides that she cannot look for work with her. Instead, she decides to disguise herself as a man, taking on the name of Cesario, and goes to work in the household of Duke Orsino. Viola (disguised as Cesario) quickly becomes a favorite of Orsino, who makes Cesario his page. Viola finds herself falling in love with Orsino—a difficult love to pursue, as Orsino believes her to be a man. But when Orsino sends Cesario to deliver Orsino’s love messages to the disdainful Olivia, Olivia herself falls for the beautiful young Cesario, believing her to be a man. The love triangle is complete: Viola loves Orsino, Orsino loves Olivia, and Olivia loves Cesario—and everyone is miserable.

Meanwhile, we meet the other members of Olivia’s household: her rowdy drunkard of an uncle, Sir Toby; his foolish friend, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who is trying in his hopeless way to court Olivia; Olivia’s witty and pretty waiting-gentlewoman, Maria; Feste, the clever clown of the house; and Malvolio, the dour, prudish steward of Olivia’s household. When Sir Toby and the others take offense at Malvolio’s constant efforts to spoil their fun, Maria engineers a practical joke to make Malvolio think that Olivia is in love with him. She forges a letter, supposedly from Olivia, addressed to her beloved (whose name is signified by the letters M.O.A.I.), telling him that if he wants to earn her favor, he should dress
in yellow stockings and crossed garters, act haughtily, smile constantly, and refuse to explain himself to anyone. Malvolio finds the letter, assumes that it is addressed to him, and, filled with dreams of marrying Olivia and becoming noble himself, happily follows its commands. He behaves so strangely that Olivia comes to think that he is mad.

Meanwhile, Sebastian, who is still alive after all but believes his sister Viola to be dead, arrives in Illyria along with his friend and protector, Antonio. Antonio has cared for Sebastian since the shipwreck and is passionately (and perhaps sexually) attached to the young man—so much so that he follows him to Orsino's domain, in spite of the fact that he and Orsino are old enemies.

Sir Andrew, observing Olivia's attraction to Cesario (still Viola in disguise), challenges Cesario to a duel. Sir Toby, who sees the prospective duel as entertaining fun, eggs Sir Andrew on. However, when Sebastian—who looks just like the disguised Viola—appears on the scene, Sir Andrew and Sir Toby end up coming to blows with Sebastian, thinking that he is Cesario. Olivia enters amid the confusion. Encountering Sebastian and thinking that he is Cesario, she asks him to marry her. He is baffled, since he has never seen her before. He sees, however, that she is wealthy and beautiful, and he is therefore more than willing to go along with her. Meanwhile, Antonio has been arrested by Orsino's officers and now begs Cesario for help, mistaking him for Sebastian. Viola denies knowing Antonio, and Antonio is dragged off, crying out that Sebastian has betrayed him. Suddenly, Viola has newfound hope that her brother may be alive. Malvolio's supposed madness has allowed the gleeful Maria, Toby, and the rest to lock Malvolio into a small, dark room for his treatment, and they torment him at will. Feste dresses up as "Sir Topas," a priest, and pretends to examine Malvolio, declaring him definitely insane in spite of his protests. However, Sir Toby begins to think better of the joke, and they allow Malvolio to send a letter to Olivia, in which he asks to be released.

Eventually, Viola (still disguised as Cesario) and Orsino make their way to Olivia's house, where Olivia welcomes Cesario as her new husband, thinking him
to be Sebastian, whom she has just married. Orsino is furious, but then Sebastian himself appears on the scene, and all is revealed. The siblings are joyfully reunited, and Orsino realizes that he loves Viola, now that he knows she is a woman, and asks her to marry him. We discover that Sir Toby and Maria have also been married privately. Finally, someone remembers Malvolio and lets him out of the dark room. The trick is revealed in full, and the embittered Malvolio storms off, leaving the happy couples to their celebration.

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS
The play opens with the great 16th-century intellectual Sir Thomas More chatting with young Richard Rich, extolling him to become a teacher rather than a politician so he won't be tempted by the bribery that comes with political office. Soon after this conversation, More is summoned by Cardinal Wolsey, the current Chancellor of England. Wolsey wants to discuss a matter of great importance: King Henry VIII’s divorce. See, Henry had petitioned the Pope some time ago to marry his current wife, Catherine, but now he wants to petition him again to divorce her. More, being a good Catholic, seems to oppose this.

Fast-forward a few months, and Wolsey is dead (after having been arrested); More is the new Chancellor. This proves to be quite stressful, however, as everyone is clamoring to know More’s opinion on the divorce. At one point, King Henry even visits More in an effort to win his support. Meanwhile, Rich has been taken under the wing of one of Henry's advisors, Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell, the shadiest dude on the planet, has made it his mission to make More approve of Henry’s divorce, by any means necessary. But that doesn’t work at all. After meeting with Chapuys, the Spanish ambassador, More decides to resign from his position as Chancellor. See, Henry has decided to go through with the divorce anyway, despite the Pope’s disapproval, leading him to sever the Church of England from the Catholic Church. More hates this but refuses to go public about the issue so that he won’t get executed for treason.

Unfortunately, Cromwell is still hunting him down. His latest plan of attack is actually quite brilliant: he convinces Parliament to create an oath declaring Henry’s spiritual supremacy. More refuses to sign it but won’t say why, which leads to his imprisonment in the Tower—London’s most feared prison.

More thinks that he can escape execution by keeping his trap shut, but Rich betrays him by falsely claiming in court that More said treasonous things. And that’s it—More is beheaded in the final moments of the play. We close things out with a character named Common Man (long story) warning the audience members to not make trouble, or they’ll risk ending up like our headless hero.

Plot Overview
The Common Man figures prominently both in the plot of the play and also as a narrator and commentator. Although treated in more detail in other sections, in the following plot
summary, his presence is indicated only when he interacts directly with the other characters in the play. Sir Thomas More, a scholar and statesman, objects to King Henry VIII’s plan to divorce and remarry in order to father a male heir. But More, ever the diplomat, keeps quiet about his feelings in the hopes that Henry will not bother him about the matter. At a meeting with Cardinal Wolsey, Lord Chancellor of England, More reviews the letter to Rome that requests the pope’s approval of Henry’s divorce. More points out that the pope provided a dispensation, or exemption, in order for Henry to get married in the first place, since Catherine, the woman Henry married, was the widow of Henry’s brother. More doubts that the pope will agree to overturn his first dispensation. Wolsey accuses More of being too moralistic and recommends that he be more practical.

After conversing with Wolsey, More runs into Thomas Cromwell, the king’s confidante. Cromwell, recently promoted to the position of cardinal’s secretary, insincerely tells More he is one of More’s greatest admirers. More also meets Signor Chapuys, the Spanish ambassador to England. Chapuys takes More’s noncommittal response to questions about his meeting with Wolsey to mean that More agrees that the divorce should not go through. Chapuys stresses Christian morals and Catholic dogma and seems most concerned that Henry does not insult Henry’s wife, Catherine, who is also the king of Spain’s aunt. Chapuys thinks he has found an ally in More.

Back at More’s home, More’s daughter, Margaret, has received a visit from Roper, her Lutheran boyfriend, despite the late hour. Roper asks More for Margaret’s hand, but More refuses to allow a Lutheran, in his eyes a heretic, into his family.

Meanwhile, Wolsey dies, leaving the position of Lord Chancellor vacant. The king was displeased with Wolsey’s failure to secure a papal dispensation to annul his marriage to Catherine, and Wolsey died in disgrace. More is appointed as Wolsey’s replacement. Cromwell meets with Richard Rich, a low-level functionary whom More helped establish and to whom More gave a silver cup he was given as a bribe. (More did not realize that the cup was a bribe when he received it.) Cromwell tempts Rich with an opportunity for advancement, and the spineless Rich seems all too eager to accept the job in exchange for information he has about More. Rich and Chapuys, who has just entered, ask Cromwell what his current position is, and Cromwell announces simply that he does whatever the king wants done. He mentions that the king has planned a boat ride down the Thames to visit More. Meanwhile, More’s manservant, Matthew (played by the Common Man), has entered the room, and Cromwell, Rich, and Chapuys are eager to bribe him for information. Matthew tells them only the most well known facts about his master, but the trio pays him off anyway.

Back at More’s home in London’s Chelsea district, the king is set to arrive, but More is nowhere to be found. After fretting over his absence, the family eventually finds him busy at vespers (evening prayers). When the king arrives, all are on their best behavior, and More comes off as the most flattering of all. However, More does tell the king that More cannot agree to the divorce, reminding him that the king promised not to bother More about it. The king storms off, telling More he will leave him alone provided More does not speak out against the divorce. Alice, More’s wife, is angry at his behavior and thinks her husband should do as Henry wants. Rich arrives to tell More that Cromwell and Chapuys are collecting information about him. He asks for employment, but More turns him away.
At a local pub called the Loyal Subject, Cromwell meets Rich to conspire against More. Rich is reluctant and guilt-ridden, but he ultimately agrees to tell Cromwell about the bribe that More received and passed on to him. In exchange, Cromwell offers Rich a job. Parliament passes the Act of Supremacy, which establishes the Church in England and appoints King Henry as its head. More decides that if the English bishops decide to go along with the act, he will resign as Lord Chancellor. Both Chapuys and Roper call it a remarkable “gesture,” but More, dead set against the act, thinks of it as a practical necessity. He refuses to explain himself to anyone but the king. Even his wife and daughter cannot know his reasons, because he does not want to put them in the position of having to testify against him later.

Cromwell meets with the Duke of Norfolk and tells him of his plan to bring More up on bribery charges. Norfolk proves that More gave the cup to Rich as soon as More realized it was a bribe, and Cromwell is forced to come up with some other way to entrap More. He tells Norfolk, however, that the king expects him to participate in the persecution of More. A now impoverished More refuses to receive a letter of appreciation from the king of Spain, and he turns down the bishops’ sincere offer of charity. Cromwell calls More to his office and attempts to malign More by accusing him of sympathizing with the Holy Maid of Kent, who was executed for treason. Cromwell also accuses him of having written a book attributed to King Henry. More deconstructs both these charges, but when Cromwell reads a letter from King Henry calling More a villain, More is genuinely shaken. Meeting Norfolk outside, More insists that if he wishes to remain in the king’s favor, Norfolk should cease to be his friend, since by this point it is dangerous to know a man like More. Parliament passes another act, this time requiring subjects to swear an oath to King Henry’s supremacy in England over the Church and to the validity of his divorce and remarriage. The next time we see More, he is in jail for having refused to take the oath.

Cromwell, Norfolk, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, interrogate More in prison, but they cannot trick him into signing the oath or divulging his opinions on the king’s behavior. As long as More refuses to talk or sign the oath, Cromwell can keep him locked up but cannot have him executed. He removes More’s books but lets his family visit, hoping that they will be able to reason with him. Though More’s daughter, Margaret, tries to convince her father he has done all he can, More refuses to relent. Alice finally sympathizes fully with More’s predicament, and, displaying their full love toward each other, they reconcile just before the jailer (the Common Man) insists that the visit is over. Cromwell gives Rich the office of attorney general for Wales in exchange for Rich’s false testimony at More’s trial. Though More never opened his mouth, Rich claims he heard More deny the king’s authority over the Church. More is sentenced to death but not before he can express his disapproval of the Supremacy Act and his disappointment with a government that would kill a man for keeping quiet. More goes to his death with dignity and composure, and the play ends with his beheading.