

## Honors Literature and Short Stories

### Week 21

#### The influence of life and times of the author

If you were to write a poem or story today, your personal life, as well as the times in which you live would greatly affect your writing. During different times in history, societal beliefs influence artists – whether they are painters, sculptors, or writers – in their work.

Two writers who clearly show the affects of their own lives and the times in which they lived were Edgar Alan Poe and Rudyard Kipling. Both men wrote both poetry and prose (stories).

#### Assignments

1. Briefly research the lives of Rudyard Kipling and Edgar Allan Poe. Choose a poem or short story by each one. Write three paragraphs: the first paragraph will be written about the life of Rudyard Kipling. The second paragraph will be about how you feel his life influenced his poetry. Be sure to include examples from the poem or short story that will back this up. The third paragraph will be written about the life of Edgar Alan Poe. The fourth paragraph will be about how you feel his life influenced his work. Be sure to include examples from the poem or short story that will back this up. This is a thought provoking assignment. You will not be required to cite your sources in the essay, but will be required to present a Works Referenced list (which will look like a Works Cited page).

**Due Week 22. 100 points**

This site has a biography and the works of Edgar Alan Poe.

<http://www.online-literature.com/poe/>

This site has a biography and the works of Rudyard Kipling.

<http://www.online-literature.com/kipling/>

2. **Weekly Shorts: 5 points** Write an emotional paragraph. Do not ever mention the actual emotion, but through the tone of your paragraph – words, structure, etc. – make it clear what the emotion is. I will send you back my guess as to the emotion.
3. **Journal 10 points** Another author whose writing may have been influenced by something in his life is James Thurber. His tone contributes to his favorite genre of humor, also. Read following two short stories by James Thurber. First, discuss your expectations as you read the stories – **before** you reached the ending. After this response, finish the story, and see how your expectation compares to the actual outcome, and respond to why you had those expectations.. Finally, after reading the article that follows the stories, Thurber, briefly discuss how his partial blindness is believed to have affected his writing.

## **The Princess and The Tin Box**

By, James Thurber

Once upon a time, in a far country, there lived a king whose daughter was the prettiest princess in the world. Her eyes were like the cornflower, her hair was sweeter than the hyacinth, and her throat made the swan look dusty.

From the time she was a year old, the princess had been showered with presents. Her nursery looked like Cartier's window. Her toys were all made of gold or platinum or diamonds or emeralds. She was not permitted to have wooden blocks or china dolls or rubber dogs or linen books, because such materials were considered cheap for the daughter of a king.

When she was seven, she was allowed to attend the wedding of her brother and throw real pearls at the bride instead of rice. Only the nightingale, with his lyre of gold, was permitted to sing for the princess. The common blackbird, with his boxwood flute, was kept out of the palace grounds. She walked in silver-and-samite slippers to a sapphire-and-topaz bathroom and slept in an ivory bed inlaid with rubies.

On the day the princess was eighteen, the king sent a royal ambassador to the courts of five neighboring kingdoms to announce that he would give his daughter's hand in marriage to the prince who brought her the gift she liked the most.

The first prince to arrive at the palace rode a swift white stallion and laid at the feet of the princess an enormous apple made of solid gold which he had taken from a dragon who had guarded it for a thousand years. It was placed on a long ebony table set up to hold the gifts of the princess's suitors. The second prince, who came on a gray charger, brought her a nightingale made of a thousand diamonds, and it was placed beside the golden apple. The third prince, riding on a black horse, carried a great jewel box made of platinum and sapphires, and it was placed next to the diamond nightingale. The fourth prince, astride a fiery yellow horse, gave the princess a gigantic heart made of rubies and pierced by an emerald arrow. It was placed next to the platinum-and-sapphire jewel box.

Now the fifth prince was the strongest and handsomest of all five suitors, but he was the son of a poor king whose realm had been overrun by mice and locusts and wizards and mining engineers so that there was nothing much of value left in it. He came plodding up to the palace of the princess on a plow horse, and he brought her a small tin box filled with mica and feldspar and hornblende which he had picked up on the way.

The other princes roared with laughter when they saw the tawdry gift the fifth prince had brought to the princess. But she examined it with great interest and squealed with delight, for all her life she had been gluttoned with precious stones and priceless metals, but she had never seen tin before or mica or feldspar or hornblende. The tin box was placed next to the ruby heart pierced by the emerald arrow.

"Now," the king said to his daughter, "you must select the gift you like the best and marry the prince that brought it."

The princess smiled and walked up to the table and picked up the present she liked the most. It was the platinum-and-sapphire jewel box, the gift of the third prince.

"The way i figure it," she said, "is this. It is a very large and expensive box, and when I am married, I will meet many admirers who will give me precious gems with which to fill it to the top. Therefore, it is the most valuable of all the gifts my suitors have brought me, and I like it the best."

The princess married the third prince that very day in the midst of great merriment and high revelry. More than a hundred thousand pearls were thrown at her and she loved it.

*Moral: All those who thought that the princess was going to select the tin box filled with worthless stones instead of one of the other gifts will kindly stay after class and write one hundred times on the blackboard, "I would rather have a hunk of aluminum silicate than a diamond necklace."*

### **The Unicorn in the Garden**

By James Thurber

Once upon a sunny morning a man who sat in a breakfast nook looked up from his scrambled eggs to see a white unicorn with a golden horn quietly cropping the roses in the garden. The man went up to the bedroom where his wife was still asleep and woke her. "There's a unicorn in the garden," he said. "Eating roses." She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him. "The unicorn is a mythical beast," she said, and turned her back on him. The man walked slowly downstairs and out into the garden. The unicorn was still there; he was now browsing among the tulips. "Here, unicorn," said the man and pulled up a lily and gave it to him. The unicorn ate it gravely. With a high heart, because there was a unicorn in his garden, the man went upstairs and roused his wife again. "The unicorn," he said, "ate a lily." His wife sat up in bed and looked at him, coldly. "You are a booby," she said, "and I am going to have you put in a booby-hatch." The man, who never liked the words "booby" and "booby-hatch," and who liked them even less on a shining morning when there was a unicorn in the garden, thought for a moment. "We'll see about that," he said. He walked over to the door. "He has a golden horn in the middle of his forehead," he told her. Then he went back to the garden to watch the unicorn; but the unicorn had gone away. The man sat among the roses and went to sleep.

And as soon as the husband had gone out of the house, the wife got up and dressed as fast as she could. She was very excited and there was a gloat in her eye. She telephoned the police and she telephoned the psychiatrist; she told them to hurry to her house and bring a strait-jacket. When the police and the psychiatrist looked at her with great interest. "My husband," she said, "saw a unicorn this morning." The police looked at the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist looked at the police. "He told me it ate a lily," she said. The psychiatrist looked at the police and the police looked at the psychiatrist. "He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead," she said. At a solemn signal from the signal from the psychiatrist, the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife. They had a hard time subduing her, for she put up a terrific struggle, but

they finally subdued her. Just as they got her into the strait-jacket, the husband came back into the house.

"Did you tell your wife you saw a unicorn?" asked the police. "Of course not," said the husband. "The unicorn is a mythical beast." "That's all I wanted to know," said the psychiatrist. "Take her away. I'm sorry, sir, but your wife is as crazy as a jay bird." So they took her away, cursing and screaming, and shut her up in an institution. The husband lived happily ever after.

Moral: Don't count your boobies until they are hatched.

*The following is excerpted from an article at Discover.com*

**This article discusses “blindsight” and the possibility that James Thurber suffered from Charles Bonnet syndrome**

Curiously, there’s a visual phenomenon that’s almost the converse of filling in. It’s called blindsight, and it occurs in some patients who have gaps in their visual fields because of brain injuries. Whereas many of the people Ramachandran studies have blind spots they don’t notice, these people have vision they don’t notice. They are somehow able to identify objects presented to their blind areas--without being consciously aware that they are seeing. Blindsight suggests not only that aspects of vision are processed separately, but that vision is processed separately from awareness. Seeing, and knowing that we see, appear to be handled differently.

Blindsight has been most extensively studied by Lawrence Weiskrantz, a psychologist at Oxford University. Twenty years ago Weiskrantz and his colleagues found that a young patient who had lost the left half of his vision because of damage to his visual cortex could nonetheless identify things in the blind field: he could distinguish between an X and an O and tell whether a line of light was vertical or horizontal; he could locate objects even though he couldn’t identify them.

But the odd thing was that the patient didn’t think he was seeing. He would guess at what was being presented only when the researchers urged him to, and then be astonished when shown how many of his answers were correct. In subsequent years Weiskrantz studied more patients with blindsight, as did other researchers. Again and again the patients appeared to have a primitive sort of vision in their blind fields but denied any awareness of it. I couldn’t see anything, not a darn thing, Weiskrantz’s patient insisted.

How can a person see and not know it? The phenomenon of blindsight has raised as many questions about the nature of consciousness as it has about visual processing. Weiskrantz suggests that blindsight is produced in parts of the brain other than the primary visual cortex. He points out that fat bundles of fibers from each optic nerve never reach the visual cortex but instead travel to the midbrain, which controls involuntary, unconscious actions. Still other fibers bypass the primary visual cortex and enter different cortical regions. These regions may produce the unconscious vision that characterizes blindsight; if they do, it means that the visual cortex is essential not only for normal vision but also for awareness of what’s being seen. If seeing takes place outside the visual cortex, it apparently doesn’t register in our

consciousness.

Late last year, however, a respected neuroscientist challenged the idea that blindsight is derived from visual pathways that are diverted to the mid-brain. Michael Gazzaniga, of the University of California at Davis, reported that he and his colleagues had discovered that a patient with blindsight actually had live, functioning neurons in the portion of his visual cortex that supposedly had been destroyed. Those islands of healthy tissue produce blindsight, Gazzaniga argues.

Asked why patients would remain unconscious of their vision if the processing is going on in the visual cortex, Gazzaniga suggests that because the preserved areas are so small, the signals patients get may just be too small to trigger a conscious reaction. Moreover, he doesn't find it surprising that we might be unaware of things going on in the cortex. Lots of studies suggest that things we're not consciously aware of go on in the cortex, probably a good deal of our psychological life.

The debate over blindsight is simple, Gazzaniga says: Weiskrantz thinks it's an alternative pathway, and we think it's the original one. More studies will be done. I have three people working around the clock on it, and it will be worked out.

An extreme form of filling in that has eerie echoes of blindsight may have afflicted American writer James Thurber, known for his humorous essays, drawings, and stories, including *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Thurber's experience illustrates the lengths the visual system will go to in order to see, vision or no. Thurber lost one eye as a boy when his brother accidentally shot him with an arrow; the remaining eye began gradually to fail. By the time Thurber turned 40, his world had become a blur--something he made light of in his work. Once he wrote about how he frightened a woman off a city bus by mistaking the purse in her lap for a chicken. As his eyesight worsened, the images he saw progressed from the slapstick to the surreal. Ordinary things underwent wild transformations. Dirt on his windshield looked like admirals in uniform or crippled apple women; he would whirl out of their way.

Thurber's fantastic visions, though not diagnosed at the time, fit the description of a disorder called Charles Bonnet syndrome, in which people who are blind or partly so--because of eye diseases or certain types of brain damage--see vivid, intensely realistic images of things that aren't there. Ramachandran and his colleague Leah Levi have taken a special interest in the syndrome. One of Ramachandran's patients, a 32-year-old San Diego man who sustained brain damage in a car accident several years ago, has lost the lower half of his visual field. He doesn't see a black band or sense a border between the sighted field and the blind one, any more than the rest of us detect boundaries at the periphery of our vision. The extraordinary thing about this patient, Ramachandran says, is that he hallucinates constantly. These hallucinations occur only in the blind field. He sees little children, and zoo animals and domestic ones, creeping up from below. He might say to me, 'As I'm talking to you, I see a monkey sitting on my lap.'

Charles Bonnet syndrome, Ramachandran says, is a more sophisticated type of filling in. It's the next level up. It's a response to visual deprivation. These hallucinations are phantom

visual images, analogous to phantom limbs. He believes they originate in portions of the brain that store visual memories and generate visual imagery. In other words, they are yet another example of the puzzling array of phenomena that emerge from the complex entanglement of eye and brain.