



March 2008

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Biography as Critical Analysis

When one analyzes a poem, the object is to decipher it: to discover the meaning that the poet intended. To some extent, understanding the life of the poet is helpful. Most biography based analysis, however, muddles the intent rather than clarifying it. Lives are subtle and cannot really be known without interpreting words and actions. Interpretation is better left to the artwork itself. We don't know for certain what another person is thinking no matter how close we are to them.

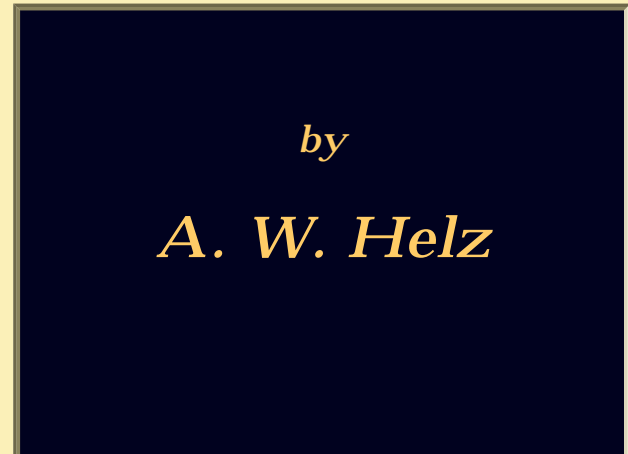
by M H Perry *in* [Editorials](#)

A Matter of Respect

Years ago, the president of a large university was asked to prepare a quotation on the subject of ethics for the foyer of a new public building. He was stumped. How do you sum up the whole of human activities and interaction with just a few words? Oh he considered many of the exalted proclamations from history, but somehow they didn't quite fit. He finally came up with this simple statement: ***Civilization is just the slow process of learning to be kind.***

by Charles Miess *in* [Columns](#)

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Biography as Critical Analysis

by M H Perry

When one analyzes a poem, the object is to decipher it: to discover the meaning that the poet intended. To some extent, understanding the life of the poet is helpful. Most biography based analysis, however, muddles the intent rather than clarifying it. Lives are subtle and cannot really be known without interpreting words and actions. Interpretation is better left to the artwork itself. We don't know for certain what another person is thinking no matter how close we are to them. As the field of psychology has informed us, there is no such thing as a *normal* person; no one is *average*. We all have our eccentricities and idiosyncrasies. If you look into anyone's life with a microscope, they seem "strange"—out of the ordinary. Those who interpret poetry based on anomalies of the writer's biography miss the point entirely. What is important in a work is how that work speaks to the human condition—the echoes we each hear of our lives in it.

Gerard Manley Hopkins suffered from unendurable depression. Because his condition was extreme, in our day, he would be helped by carefully administered anti-depressants. Since there was no such thing in the late 1800's, he attempted to solve his problem by going to an increasingly authoritarian religious structure moving from Anglicanism to Catholicism to priesthood. It did not help. What is significant about Hopkins, however, is that his work speaks to difficulties we all face at one time or another.

The worst case of missing the point with criticism is the critical approach to Sylvia Plath. Plath became famous because of her poetry, not because of her suicide. Hundreds of thousands of people around the world commit suicide each year, and after a period of intense mourning are largely forgotten. Much is made of Plath's death since the circumstances are helpful in understanding some of what she wrote.

Her depression, however, was largely situationally rather than biologically generated. At the time of her death, she had been married for about seven years to a man who had deserted her and their infant children for another woman. Just prior to that, her husband, Ted Hughes, had insisted that he needed to move to a rural area from London so that he could write better. The country home which he soon left lacked many conveniences, and when Hughes left her and their infants there, England experienced their worst winter in a

hundred years. Plath worried about the babies freezing to death. She suffered from very high fevers, but knew that she had to remain a productive writer in order to support herself and her children. Hughes' support payments were calculated on the basis of Plath's income being part of his income since everything a woman earned was considered her husband's property. This resulted in Hughes owing nothing to Plath, so he went off to vacation in Spain with his mistress [who later died with her child by suicide since she ironically bore the blame for Hughes' infidelity].

Under these circumstances, there are many people who would succumb to their depression—especially those as self-demanding as was Plath. She had become known as a poet through the intensity of her work. When she met Hughes, she told him that she could get his work published, and she did. The price was enormous, however. She created her own poetry and typed it all—before computers when an error meant re-typing the whole page—and sent it out to publishers. She typed all his poetry and sent it out to publishers. When she was earning their income by teaching at Smith College, she had to prepare her courses in addition to all of that and to doing the housework. When they were entertaining friends at the time, Hughes belittled her for not getting around to sewing a button on his jacket.

Despite that, Hughes received far more acclaim for his work than did Plath because of the bias favoring male poets.

Robert Frost was a fairly typical family man. To repeat, however, no one is average, and biographers have made him look bad in a number of respects. If we concentrate on his idiosyncrasies, we get further and further away from what he intended in his poetry.

The crucial thing in analyzing and interpreting poetry is to see what it says about the human condition—how does it speak to experiences we all have.

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A Matter of Respect

by Charles Miess

Years ago, the president of a large university was asked to prepare a quotation on the subject of ethics for the foyer of a new public building. He was stumped. How do you sum up the whole of human activities and interaction with just a few words? Oh he considered many of the exalted proclamations from history, but somehow they didn't quite fit. He finally came up with this simple statement: *Civilization is just the slow process of learning to be kind.*

Kindness is an abstract concept; it's something you can't touch, hear, see, taste, or smell, yet everyone knows what it is. You don't need to attend an expensive seminar and listen to lofty words to understand what it means to be kind. It's a simple word that is profound in its implications. The creators of a billboard for New York State must have had a similar mindset on a related subject—respect. The message was short, effective, and to the point. “Teach your son to respect women,” it said. Our interpretation of *respect* is perhaps a bit fuzzier than it is for *kindness*, especially when it comes to women. But it, too, carries a powerful message of a simple way to solve a lot of the ills in our society. All we have to do is properly define it, and practice it.



I hate to reveal my age, but I grew up in the middle of the last century when respect for a woman had an entirely different slant than it does today. Then, respect meant “ladies first.” It meant opening a door for a woman; it meant putting her on a pedestal. Respect meant avoiding crude and vulgar language in her company; it meant protecting her. My first date taught me one more thing. I should walk on the street-side of the sidewalk to shield her from dirt and grime and mud that might be thrown from passing cars. It all made perfect sense to me. Then, just when I felt comfortable with my role as a young man, everything began to change.

Many women started to resent special treatment. I was totally baffled. I remember one of

my friends trying to explain the new reality to me in his simple, crude teenage way. “The secret,” he said, “is to treat a lady like a whore and a whore like a lady.” That statement alone should have exposed the inherent disrespect and ‘sex object’ implications lurking under our trappings of respect. I translated that to mean—admittedly an oversimplification and rife with exceptions—that a self-assured woman feels special treatment is condescending, while one with low self esteem relishes it.

Unfortunately, I was slow at learning and even slower at unlearning all of the things that governed my social behavior. To make matters worse, most of the women in my life were of the self-assured sort. Paula, for example, was a gifted engineer and my co-worker during the 80’s. We carpoled for a while, and each morning I tried, in my subtle way, to get to the office door slightly ahead of her so I would be the one to open it. I thought she wouldn’t notice. She did. After that, I made no special effort and she often opened the door for me. I felt intensely uncomfortable being on the receiving end. That should have told me something about how she felt, but it was much too early in the unlearning process for me to make that connection.

It’s been a long struggle for me to learn that real respect is regard for another person as a human being rather than as a sexual being. I finally got it! Then that damn billboard happened to come along. Don’t get me wrong, I think it had a good message and an important message about a specific social problem. But when looking at it from a broader perspective it seems incomplete at best and one-sided at worst. Shouldn’t respect go both ways?

Troubling inferences began to assault my mind. Are we to go back to individual treatment for men and women? I hope not. I couldn’t take unlearning what I’ve re-learned all these years. Does it mean that women already respect men so they don’t need reminding? Ummm, I doubt it. Does it mean that men are not worthy of respect? I suppose a good case could be made both for and against that premise, just as it could for any other group, including women.

I’ve decided that the correct answer is “None of the above.” I suspect that all of my musing is nothing but an old complex wandering about my brain, kicking at synapses along the way, and trying his best to stir up trouble between the sexes. Well, it ain’t going to work. I am NOT going to fall for it! I’m perfectly ok with that billboard. I really am. And yet, I wonder—nothing more than idle curiosity, mind you—I just can’t help wondering what the reaction would have been if that billboard had said: “Teach your daughter to respect men.”



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ARTS

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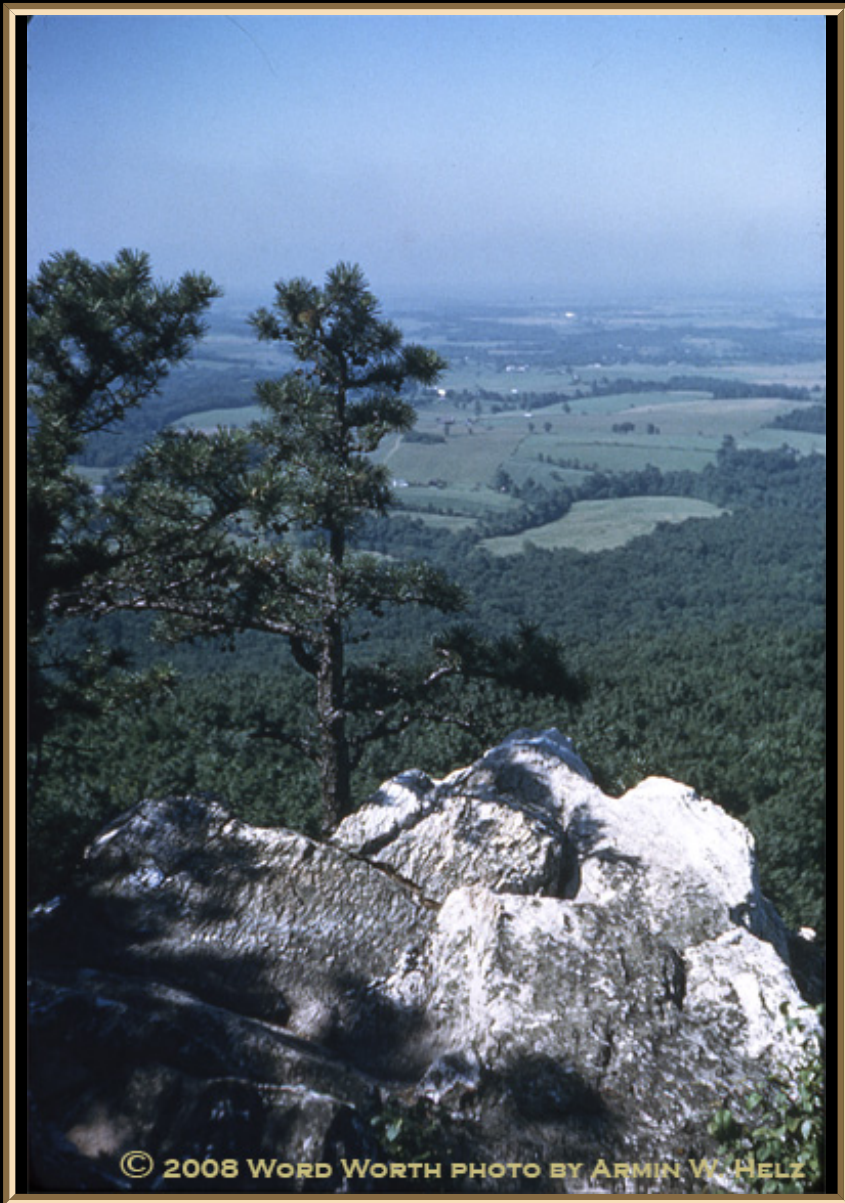
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