The River-Merchant's Wife

POEM TEXT

After Li Po

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chōkan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.
At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever, and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed
You went into far Ku-tō-en, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me.
I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Chō-fū-Sa.

SUMMARY

When I still had a little kid's haircut, I used to play around by my garden gate, picking flowers. You walked past on stilts pretending to be a horse; you circled me, toying with plums. We both grew up in the little village of Chōkan: we were innocent children, without any feelings of hate or mistrust. When I turned fourteen, I married you, my honored husband. I felt shy, so I didn't laugh at our wedding. I ducked my head and looked at the wall; no matter how many times you called my name, I didn't respond.

By the time I was fifteen, I stopped being so standoffish. I fell so deeply in love with you that I wanted our ashes to be mixed together after we were dead, so we could spend eternity together. Why would I bother to look at anything but you?

When I was sixteen, you left for Ku-tō-en, the faraway city by the wild river. You've been gone for five months now. In the trees above my head, the monkeys seem to be mourning your absence.

You were reluctant to go, dragging your feet. Now, by our gate, all kinds of different mosses have grown, so deep that I can't even begin to get rid of them. This autumn, the leaves are getting blown off the trees sooner than usual. The sight of yellow, summery butterflies flitting over the lawn in the western part of our garden makes my heart ache. I'm getting older. If you're returning through the narrow passages of the Kiang river, let me know when you're coming, and I'll travel out to meet you, all the way to Chō-fū-Sa.

THEMES

LOVE AND LONGING

"The River Merchant's Wife" is Ezra Pound's translation and reimagination of a poem by the 8th-century Chinese writer Li Bai (whom Pound knew and credited as "Li Po"). The poem's speaker—the young "Wife" of the title—writes a letter to her husband, who's been away from home for five months. Retelling the couple's story, from their shared childhood to their wedding to their present separation, the speaker's letter shows that deep love can creep up on people before they know it. Perhaps, the poem suggests, it's difficult to know just how much you love someone until you're separated from them.

The speaker and her husband have known each other for nearly their whole lives, but they didn't love each other right from the start. When she and her husband first met, the speaker recalls,

they were nothing more than children; she still had her hair "cut straight across [her] forehead" like a little girl's, and she and her husband used to play together near her "front gate." That innocence persisted right up until the speaker was 14, when the couple were married: she was so young that she felt too "bashful" even to look her new husband in the eye.

However, the poem suggests, love can creep up before one knows it. Only a year after their wedding, the speaker recalls, she was so head-over-heels for her new husband that she "desired [her] dust to be mingled with [his] / Forever and forever." By the time he left for a long journey a year later, she found that she was so much in love with him that the whole world seemed miserable at his absence: even the "monkeys," to her ears, "make sorrowful noise overhead" now that he's away. Still very young, the speaker feels as she's grown far "older" over the "five months" of her husband's journey. Every day they spend apart strikes her as an age.

Through this portrait of a speaker's longing for her young husband, the poem suggests that love might sometimes feel clearest and strongest when people can't be near their beloveds. Absence, as the saying goes, makes the heart grow fonder.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chōkan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

"The River-Merchant's Wife" begins with a picture of a childhood friendship. The speaker remembers a time when her "hair was still cut straight across [her] forehead"—that is, when she still had ruler-straight little-kid bangs. Back then, she recalls:

> I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
> You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
> You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.

The "you" in the speaker's apostrophe, readers can sense, must be an older child, a kid allowed to ramble around on stilts while the speaker is still confined to her family's front garden.

The speaker uses simple, direct language here, merely describing what she and this older kid used to do. The specific things she chooses to describe, though, paint a vivid emotional picture. The image of the older child "walk[ing] about" the speaker as she sits "pulling flowers," for instance, suggests that the older child is a bit of a show-off, in a sweet childish way, trying to impress the speaker with his stilt-walking and a tasty armful of "blue plums." That showing-off seems to have worked, too: the speaker remembers it well even now that she's older.

And take another look at the parallel structure in these lines:

> I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
> You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
> You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.

These circling repetitions mirror the way the older child circles the younger one—and suggest that these games happened more than once, that the speaker is describing not just one afternoon but a whole childhood of play. And so, the speaker says, "we went on living in the village of Chōkan": / Two small people, without dislike or suspicion."

That image of "small people, without dislike or suspicion" evokes a kind of innocence the speaker has grown beyond but remembers fondly. As "small people," she and her friend are getting ready to grow into big people who *will* know dislike and suspicion, whose hair is no longer cut in straight-across bangs.

In its first lines, then, the poem paints a picture of gentle, fond memories. The "you" the speaker addresses must be a person she still cares about—and perhaps a person for whom she still feels a flicker of the awe a younger kid feels for an older one.

These lines also give readers a peek at the speaker's world. Ezra Pound adapted this poem from an 8th-century work by the Chinese poet Li Bai (whom he credits here as "Li Po"), and the scene here—bamboo stilts, blue plums—suggests a picturesque, rural, long-ago China.

LINES 7-10

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

In the poem's first six lines, the speaker addressed a kid she grew up with, remembering the way he used to come see her while she played by her family's front gate. Now, a surprise: "At fourteen," the speaker declares, "I married My Lord you."

The awe of the little kid for the older here transforms into that surprising "My Lord"—language that could sound stiffly formal or sincerely reverent. Keeping the poem's ancient Chinese context in mind, the speaker might guess that such a grand and elegant title might once have been a more common way for a wife to address her husband than it would be now.

However, the urgent way the poem introduces these words—"My Lord you" rather than the more grammatically

usual "you, My Lord"—suggests that the speaker feels some genuine passion as she says these words; her phrasing here feels as if she's fervently saying "My Lord God," not formally addressing her spouse.

Remembering that this poem takes place in ancient China might also help readers to weigh the fact that the bride was just 14 when she was married. In the poem's world, that doesn't seem shocking; the speaker's gentle tone makes it clear that this isn't the tale of an illicit child wedding.

However, that doesn't mean that the speaker didn't feel young and inexperienced on her wedding day. Too "bashful" and shy to "laugh," she couldn't even make eye contact with her new husband at first. Take a look at her repetitions here:

> I never laughed, being bashful.
> Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
> Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

Notice the way that "never" and "looked" flow through this passage: first "never" appears, then "looked," then both together. These nervous repetitions, doubling down on the idea of "never looking," evoke the speaker's persistent, uncomfortable wall-staring: each new line gives her a chance to look up or make a sound, and each new line insists that she won't do it.

All together, these lines suggest the speaker's confused, overwhelming, and rather mixed feelings at getting married. There's obviously some pleasure for her in marrying the big kid who used to bring her plums—now a powerful "My Lord" in her imagination—but she's also still painfully young and shy, not all that far from her small self with her pudding-bowl haircut.

This first stanza has introduced the speaker and her husband through flexible free verse, without rhyme or meter. That choice honors the difficulty of rendering Chinese poetry in English: it's not easy to preserve style in a translation between these two very different languages. But then, Pound wasn't exactly translating here! This poem is in fact based on notes by *another* translator, Ernest Fenollosa. Mostly, the free verse here reflects Pound's own desire to "make it new": to use language in surprising, unrestricted ways, capturing feeling and experience in sharp images.

LINES 11-14

> *At fifteen I stopped scowling,*
> *I desired my dust to be mingled with yours*
> *Forever and forever, and forever.*
> *Why should I climb the look out?*

The speaker introduced her marriage abruptly in the first stanza. Now, she skims over the first year of her marriage in one line: "At fifteen," she says, "I stopped scowling." Her choice of the word "scowling" suggests that she looks back on her early "bashful[ness]" with self-deprecating humor: "stop scowling" is the sort of thing a parent says to a sulky teenager. Quickly, then, the speaker grew up.

Not only did she grow up, she fell intensely and unexpectedly in love. Once unable to meet her husband's eyes, she now:

> [...] desired my dust to be mingled with yours
> Forever and forever, and forever.

The speaker, in other words, falls so head-over-heels in love with her new husband that just being with him *now* isn't enough: she looks forward to the day when, in death, their ashes can be mixed together for eternity. The diacope of "forever and forever, and forever"—not to mention the caesura at the comma, which might make one *think* she's going to say something new until she adds yet another "forever"—stresses her overwhelming passion.

The speaker feels she's grown up and grown into her love. Readers might still see her intensity here as touchingly youthful (if also deadly serious): she's in *Romeo and Juliet* terrain now, carried away by her first passion.

The rhetorical question with which she ends this passage suggests, though, that (to paraphrase another Shakespeare play) the course of true love won't run altogether smoothly. "Why should I climb the look out?" the speaker asks—a question that might equally imply, "Why should I bother looking at anything but you, beloved husband?" and "Why should I be worried about anything, with such joy in my life?" In the next stanza, alas, she'll discover that the view from the "look out" might have warned her of coming pain.

LINES 15-18

> *At sixteen you departed*
> *You went into far Ku-tō-en, by the river of swirling eddies,*
> *And you have been gone five months.*
> *The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.*

Once again, the speaker leaps a year forward in her life with a swift moment of anaphora. "At fifteen," she "stopped scowling" and fell deeply in love with her husband. "At sixteen," though, her beloved "departed," leaving for what readers can guess is a business trip. He's a "river-merchant," after all, and he leaves for "far Ku-tō-en" via the "river of swirling eddies"—an image of turbulent waters that suggests this trip might have its dangers.

The speaker doesn't take this well at all. Her husband, she complains, has been gone a whole "five months," a pretty big percentage of a marriage only two years old! Yet she says nothing more about her unhappiness in this stanza—at least, not directly. However, take a look at the way lines 17 and 18 sit next to each other:

> And you have been gone five months.
> The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

Rather than saying "you have been gone five months, and I sit in the garden and weep," or "you have been gone five months, and I feel as if my heart is bleeding," the speaker simply sits back and observes her surroundings, listening to the "sorrowful noise" of the monkeys in the trees.

Here, the reader might say: *Wait just a minute*. Monkeys are not animals known for their "sorrowful noise"; readers who've encountered a monkey are more likely to remember energetic hoots and shrieks than mournful crooning. If these monkeys sound sorrowful to the speaker, it's only because the whole *world* feels sorrowful to her. Anthropomorphizing the monkeys, projecting her own feelings onto them, the speaker makes it clear that she's sad enough that everything she hears or sees gets swallowed up in her sadness.

Over the course of three four-line passages, the speaker has told the complete story of her marriage. Notice that this story has all been in the form of an apostrophe to her husband, who presumably knows everything she's telling him just as well as she does.

Pound subtitled this poem "A Letter"; if so, it's clearly a love letter, in which reminiscing about a shared history is a pleasure for both writer and reader. "Bashful" the speaker might have been at first, but she's completely open here, trusting her husband with her memories of her awkward younger self and her current fullhearted longing for him.

LINES 19-21

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!

The speaker isn't the only one who wishes her husband hadn't gone away. When he "went out," she remembers, he "dragged his feet," as reluctant to leave her as she was to be left. Once again, the speaker doesn't dwell on feelings here, but on images: the picture of those dragging feet *shows* readers everything they need to know about how the husband felt.

The speaker's observations of her garden are just as full of implied feeling. Just like when she was a child, the speaker sits by a garden "gate" now. But rather than "pulling flowers," she just stares. Listen to her repetition:

> By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
> Too deep to clear them away!

The polyptoton of "moss" and "mosses" suggests that the speaker has been staring dully at those mosses for so long that she's started to see them differently. What at first just seemed like a generic carpet of moss has now resolved into "different" kinds; this is the sort of thing you only notice when you've had a lot of time to think about it! And the idea that the moss has grown "too deep" to be cleared away, like the image of the sorrowful monkeys, says more about how drained, sad, and listless the speaker feels than how deep the moss really is.

Perhaps there's also something significant about the idea that the speaker is spending a lot of time out by the gate in particular. Remember, a garden gate was where she and her husband used to play together as children; the garden gate, too, might have been the way the husband left their house. Loitering by the gate, the speaker seems to long for both the past and for the future day when her husband will walk through that gate again.

LINES 22-26

The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me.
I grow older.

Over the course of the five months that her husband has been away from home, the 16-year-old speaker feels as if she's become an old, old woman. It's August now, she observes, but it seems to be autumn already. The wind is blowing the leaves off the trees "early," and the "paired butterflies" seem to be turning "yellow" just like autumn leaves do as they flit "over the grass in the West garden."

Notice, here, that the speaker is drawing on memories she and her husband share. In the couple's two years together, he too must have seen the leaves fall and the butterflies pair off; he knows just what the "West garden" looks like. Just like the speaker's retelling of their love story, these images suggest a shared and affectionate history.

The speaker's imagery of the summer garden turning autumnal too fast suggests that—as with those "sorrowful" monkeys—she's seeing her own feelings reflected in the landscape here. Now, for the first time since the second stanza, she says something about her emotions directly. The sight of the "paired butterflies," poignantly suggesting companionship, drives her to these short, sad lines:

> They hurt me.
> I grow older.

These two three-word declarations only reveal what the reader (and the reading husband) already know. By couching these simple statements of feeling in rich imagery, the speaker suggests that she misses her husband so badly she almost *couldn't* say so directly: no melodramatic description of her pain could express what she feels so clearly as an image of a whole summer world withering away "early."

Here again, readers might be touched both by the intensity of the speaker's emotion and by her youth. The idea that five months is an unbearable eternity suggests passionate feeling,

certainly. But it also suggests the timescale of a person whose whole life hasn't had that many months in it, total.

LINES 27-30

If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Chō-fū-Sa.

After the speaker's quiet, simple declaration of her pain in lines 25-26, the poem swings around to take a quite different tone. The speaker is done making her emotional complaint. Now, she takes action, planning for her husband's return.

So far, this poem has presented the speaker as a homebody: whether by choice or by custom, she doesn't seem to go too far from her own front "gate." But five months of separation from her husband have made her bolder. Anticipating his return, she begs him to "let me know beforehand" what route he's going to take when he comes home, and whether he'll be traveling via "the narrows of the river Kiang." If he is, she says, "I will come out to meet you."

In fact, she'll come out to meet him "as far as Chō-fū-Sa." The geographic specifics here might not mean much to a reader not familiar with 8th-century Chinese place names. But the idea that the speaker will travel "as far as Chō-fū-Sa" hints that this might be a pretty substantial journey. To be reunited with her husband that little bit sooner, she's willing to step beyond the garden gate.

In more ways than one, then, the speaker "come[s] out to meet" her husband in this poem. Her poignant, sincere, honest letter tells the story of her growth: from child to woman, bashful girl to ardent lover.

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The speaker's apostrophe to her faraway husband gives the poem its intimate, loving tone. In much of this poem, which is presented as a letter, the speaker reminisces about her life with her husband, her affectionate voice suggesting that she knows he remembers everything she describes as well as she does.

In one sense, the speaker and her husband have known each other forever: the two of them used to play "about the front gate" when they were children, the speaker "pulling flowers" and the husband-to-be "playing horse" on his "bamboo stilts." In another sense, though, their marriage is still fresh and young. The two, the speaker reports, were married when she was just "fourteen"; she's "sixteen" now, and her initial "bashful[ness]" around her husband has only recently evolved into a passionate love.

Directing her memories of their time together to her husband, the speaker comes across as vulnerable, sincere, and sweet. She's absolutely not hiding anything from him, from her initial shyness and resistance to her current overwhelming longing for him to return.

Apostrophe thus helps to characterize both the speaker and her husband. It's not just the speaker's picture of her husband "dragg[ing his] feet" when he left, but her willingness to write so directly and openly to him, that makes it clear this marriage is a truly loving one.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse, / You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums."
- **Line 5:** "And we went on living in the village of Chōkan:"
- **Line 7:** "At fourteen I married My Lord you."
- **Line 12:** "I desired my dust to be mingled with yours"
- **Line 15:** "At sixteen you departed"
- **Lines 16-17:** "You went into far Ku-tō-en, by the river of swirling eddies, / And you have been gone five months."
- **Line 19:** "You dragged your feet when you went out."
- **Lines 27-29:** "If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang, / Please let me know beforehand, / And I will come out to meet you"

REPETITION

The poem uses different flavors of repetition to evoke the speaker's feelings and the passing of time.

For example, when the speaker starts her letter to her husband with a look back at their shared childhood, parallelism evokes their old games and habits:

> I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
> You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
> You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.

The similar phrasings here suggest that these were things the speaker and her then-playmate did over and over, the fabric of their young days. Polyptoton on "played" and "playing" similarly underscores their shared innocence.

Another parallel phrasing follows the speaker through the years of her marriage:

> At fourteen I married My Lord you.
> [...]
> At fifteen I stopped scowling,
> [...]
> At sixteen you departed

The anaphora here keeps a finger on the pulse of the speaker's love story as it develops. "At fourteen" she's too shy even to

look at her husband. But "at sixteen" she's heartbroken to be separated from him for a few months, longing for even her "dust" to be mixed with her husband's "forever and forever, and forever" (words that themselves create an insistent moment of diacope). This attention to time also invites readers to do some quick and sympathetic math: if the young couple have only been married for two years, then "five months" of separation is a big percentage of their married lives!

All the speaker can do while her husband is away (besides write this letter) is gaze mournfully at their garden. "By the gate now," she observes, "the moss is grown, the different mosses"—a moment of second-thought polyptoton that suggests long and focused staring at one patch of ground. And listen to the anaphora in this wistful description:

> The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
> The paired butterflies are already yellow with August

These similar phrasings make it sound as if the speaker is listlessly holding up these sad, beautiful visions one by one, getting no comfort from them; she can only conclude, "They hurt me."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "I played about the front gate, pulling flowers."
- **Lines 3-4:** "You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse, / You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums."
- **Line 7:** "At fourteen"
- **Line 9:** "I looked at the wall."
- **Line 10:** "I never looked back."
- **Line 11:** "At fifteen"
- **Line 13:** "Forever and forever, and forever."
- **Line 15:** "At sixteen"
- **Line 20:** "moss," "mosses"
- **Line 22:** "The leaves fall early"
- **Line 23:** "The paired butterflies are already yellow"

PATHETIC FALLACY

A single moment of pathetic fallacy (and anthropomorphism) suggests just how desolate the speaker feels in her husband's absence.

In line 17, the speaker laments that her husband has been "gone five months." Her next line reveals a lot about how she feels about that:

> The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

The monkeys, of course, do no such thing: the monkeys make the exact same kinds of noises that they always make. It's the *speaker* who's sorrowful here, and through the lens of her sorrow, the whole world seems to be in mourning, monkeys included.

Perhaps it's especially meaningful that the speaker projects her feelings onto *monkeys*—not typically imagined as the saddest of animals. To hear "sorrowful noise" in a monkey's shrieks and chatterings, the speaker must be having an awful time.

This one spare moment of anthropomorphism thus captures a whole state of mind. To a person who's really suffering, even cheerful or energetic sights and sounds can feel melancholy (a point that becomes even clearer when the speaker describes how the sight of "paired butterflies" flitting around her garden "hurt[s]" her. The speaker's sorrowful monkeys reflect the sheer intensity of her emotion; they might even encourage readers to remember that the speaker is just 16 and head-over-heels in love.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** "The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead."

IMAGERY

The poem's moments of imagery paint a delicate picture of the speaker's world and her feelings.

Writing to her husband, who's been away from home for five months, the speaker depicts the late-summer sights of their home with gentle sadness. The "mosses" around their garden gate have grown so "deep" that the speaker can't even work up the energy to "clear them away"; the "butterflies" seem to be changing color like autumn leaves, "already yellow."

These pictures of pillowy moss and flitting butterflies are as pretty as they're sad. The speaker seems to see nothing but how very long her husband has been away in the moss's overgrowth and the butterflies' autumnal yellow. But she's also lovingly describing the "garden" she and her husband share, perhaps trying to encourage her husband's homesickness and hurry him back sooner. The "sorrowful noise" of monkeys in the trees, meanwhile, expresses the speaker's own sorrow.

Much of this imagery, then, speaks for the speaker, expressing her feelings in pictures. A similarly subtle line of imagery describes the speaker herself, right at the beginning of the poem:

> While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
> I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.

That image of straight little-kid bangs (and the speaker's use of the word "still") evokes childhood in one stroke, at once suggesting just how small the speaker was when she met her husband and telling readers that she has grown up now. (Of course, there's something touching about that implication, too: the speaker is still only sixteen, not very far from her

remembered childhood at all.)

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead"
- **Line 18:** "The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead."
- **Lines 20-21:** "By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses, / Too deep to clear them away!"
- **Lines 23-24:** "The paired butterflies are already yellow with August / Over the grass in the West garden;"

VOCABULARY

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead (Line 1) - The implication in this line is that hair cut "straight across [one's] forehead" is a hairdo that marks out a little kid—like pigtails or a bowl cut.

Bashful (Line 8) - Shy, modest.

Scowling (Line 11) - Frowning, grimacing.

Swirling eddies (Line 16) - Whirlpools and circling ripples in a river or stream.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The River-Merchant's Wife" is written in four irregular stanzas of free verse, with no meter or rhyme. Each stanza depicts a phase in the speaker's life with her husband: the first stanza traces their childhood together, the two shorter middle stanzas the first years of their marriage and the husband's departure, and the last and longest stanza her longing for her husband to return from his journey (which, "five months" in, strikes her as far too long already). The changing stanza lengths here suggest that the five months the speaker's husband has been away feel like an eternity: the stanza describing these months stretches out longer even than the stanza describing their whole childhoods!

This poem is a translation of a work by the 8th-century Chinese poet Li Bai—or rather, it builds on an earlier translation of the poem by Ernest Fenollosa. Pound himself couldn't read much Chinese. Li Bai's original poem (and Fenollosa's notes) aren't so much a model for Pound as a springboard for his own vivid visions and formal experiments.

METER

This free verse poem doesn't use any meter. That's partly a pragmatic choice: this is a translation from the Chinese, Pound's take on an 8th-century work by the poet Li Bai. Rather than trying to mimic the rhythms of the original poem, Pound uses flexible free verse to evoke its images and its sentiments. (In fact, Pound couldn't even read much Chinese: this poem is based on the work of another translator.)

Perhaps free verse is an especially fitting choice here for emotional reasons, too. Written in the form of a love letter, this poem feels gentle and intimate; flexible, sensitive, informal free verse suggests the closeness between the speaker and her beloved, faraway husband.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in free verse, this poem doesn't use a rhyme scheme. The lack of rhyme here suits this poem's gentle, thoughtful, intimate tone: this letter to the speaker's beloved husband doesn't need anything so formal as a rhyme scheme to communicate her heartfelt longing.

The lack of rhyme here also reflects the fact that this is a translation: Pound's version of a work by the 8th-century Chinese poet Li Bai. Rather than trying to imperfectly capture the sounds and rhythms of the original, Pound focuses on his model's imagery. (In fact, Pound couldn't read much Chinese! This poem, and others like it, instead draw on the notes of earlier translators; there's something like an elegant modernist game of telephone going on here.)

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is the "River-Merchant's Wife" of the title: a young bride longing for her beloved husband to come home from a long journey. Only about 16 years old at the time the poem takes place, she writes her husband a letter, describing how they used to play together as children, how "bashful" she felt on their wedding day, and how quickly she fell head-over-heels in love with him not long after.

The speaker's passionate sincerity and beautiful imagery mark her out as a sensitive, genuine soul, unafraid to tell her husband exactly how she feels (even when that means remembering the early days when she "never looked back" at him).

SETTING

This poem—Pound's creative "translation" (or reinterpretation) of the Chinese poet Li Bai's original—takes place in Li Bai's own 8th-century China. The speaker's vibrant descriptions of the natural world around her help to give this tale of longing its dreamy, gentle atmosphere. When the speaker's husband travels to "far Ku-tō-en, by the river of swirling eddies," she stays home in a house where thick "mosses" grow by the gate and "paired butterflies" flit "over the grass in the West garden." Without her beloved husband, though, these beauties only "hurt" the speaker; even the "monkeys" in the trees above her seem to "make sorrowful noise."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was one of the most important figures in modernist poetry. Reacting against inherited traditions of poetic rhyme, meter, and form, the modernists strove to (in Pound's words) "make it new," embracing free verse and intense, sometimes surreal imagery.

Pound was a hub of the modernist movement; in his work as a literary editor, he championed the work of writers like T.S. Eliot, H.D. (Hilda Dolittle), and James Joyce. As this poem shows, his forward-looking modernism was also influenced by the far past. This reworking of an 8th-century Chinese poem by Li Bai is one of a collection, *Cathay* (1915), in which Pound presents new versions of Classical Chinese poems based on notes by the translator Ernest Fenollosa.

Pound took great liberties with these "translations," treating the original poems as jumping-off points for his own stylistic experiments. The spare language and bright imagery of the originals, however, clearly influenced Pound in his later work. His unfinished masterpiece, *The Cantos*, shows the marks of his interest not only in Chinese poetry, but Chinese history and philosophy, too.

Pound's legacy is complicated, tainted by his antisemitism (which he did, however, repent toward the end of his life) and his active support for fascist governments during World War II. Inarguably, though, his poetic vision and his support for his fellow modernists changed the course of literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When "The River-Merchant's Wife" was published in 1915, World War I was ripping Europe apart. This horrendously destructive conflict, fought mostly from muddy and perilous trenches, killed 16 million people over the course of four years.

The WWI period is known for its soldier poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, whose work recorded the horrors of the battlefield. While Pound never went to war himself, *Cathay*, too, responded to the trauma and sorrow of the war.

Many of the poems Pound chose to adapt for this collection dealt with wartime themes. The poem's speakers long for home, prepare for battle, or (as in "The River-Merchant's Wife") wish desperately that a faraway husband would come home: all feelings that soldiers and their loved ones knew well. The sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, a friend of Pound's who fought (and died) in the war, even told Pound that he read excerpts of *Cathay* to his fellow soldiers in the trenches and that it gave them comfort: "I use [the book] to put courage in my fellows," he wrote.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Life of Li Bai — Learn more about Li Bai, the Chinese poet whose work Pound translates here. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Li-Bai)
- Pound's Biography — Learn about Pound's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ezra-pound)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the actor Jodie Foster performing the poem. (https://youtu.be/cTe0C7IhG8w)
- Pound's "Translations" — Read about the complex history of Pound's translations of Chinese poetry (which many critics see more as new works inspired by the source material than attempts at faithful translation). (https://campuspress.yale.edu/modernismlab/cathay/)
- Pound's Difficult Legacy — Read a short overview of Pound's life that discusses his fascist politics, his antisemitism, and his years in a mental hospital. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/20/the-bughouse-poetry-politics-and-madness-of-ezra-pound-daniel-swift-review)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EZRA POUND POEMS

- In a Station of the Metro
- Portrait d'une Femme

HOW TO CITE

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