

Poems About Science

The following poems express different attitudes toward science and rational thinking. Identify the tone of each poem and consider the arguments each speaker makes about the nature and value of science.

Sonnet: To Science

Edgar Allen Poe

Science! true daughter of old Time thou art,
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?
5 How should he love thee, or how deem thee wise,
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,
Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?
Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car,
10 And driven the hamadryad from the wood
To seek a shelter in some happier star?
Hast thou not torn the naiad from her flood,
The elfin from the green grass, and from me
The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

What characteristics make this poem a sonnet?

Whom is the speaker addressing, and what literary devices does the speaker employ in doing so? Describe the tone of the poem.

What scientific principle is referred to in line 2? Explain. How is this reference somewhat ironic in this context?

What is the "Vulture" (line 4)? Why is it described this way? What literary device is this an example of? How is the description of its wings paradoxical (line 4), and what is the effect of this paradox?

What are the purpose and the effect of the rhetorical questions the speaker asks?

What do you think is the "treasure in the jewelled skies" (line 7)?

What other literary device is used in line 9, and what is its effect?

What do you think the "summer dream beneath the tamarind tree" (line 14) represents to the speaker?

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Emily Dickinson

"Faith" is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see—
But *Microscopes* are prudent
In an Emergency.

Describe the rhythm and sound of the poem, as well as the effect of the speaker's metrical and sonic choices.

Why do you think the word "Faith" appears in quotation marks? (Consider the significance of the word "invention.") What do you think microscopes represent to the speaker? What point is the speaker expressing about these things? What kind of "Emergency" might the speaker mean?

Why do you think the speaker specifically mentions "Gentlemen"?

In addition to science and rational thinking, what other situations and contexts might this poem be relevant to?

Science
Robinson Jeffers

Man, introverted man, having crossed
In passage and but a little with the nature of things this latter century
Has begot giants; but being taken up
Like a maniac with self-love and inward conflicts cannot manage his hybrids.
5 Being used to deal with edgeless dreams,
Now he's bred knives on nature turns them also inward: they have thirsty
 points though.
His mind forebodes his own destruction;
Actæon who saw the goddess naked among leaves and his hounds tore him.
A little knowledge, a pebble from the shingle,
10 A drop from the oceans: who would have dreamed this infinitely little
 too much?

What tone does the speaker express toward science? Discuss the aspects of the poem's style that convey this tone.

In the context of the poem, what is the significance of the speaker's description of humankind as "introverted man" (line 1)?

In context, what is "the nature of things" (line 2), and what does it mean that man has "crossed" it? What does it mean that man has "begot giants" (line 3), and what literary devices does this express contain?

What do you think it means that man is "taken up...with self-love and inward conflicts" (line 4)? What do you think "his hybrids" might be, and what does it mean that he "cannot manage" them?

What are "edgeless dreams" (line 5), and why are the dreams of man no longer edgeless? Discuss the literary devices used in line 6 to develop this image, including a mixed metaphor. What does the speaker mean when he says that man "turns them also inward" and that they "have thirsty points"?

What literary device is used in line 8, and what idea does the speaker convey with it? In the context of the poem, what do the "naked goddess" and the hounds represent?

What idea do the metaphors "a pebble" and "a drop" help express? What literary devices are used in line 10, and what irony does this line express?