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 Allan 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 wouldest 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,
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?

1. What characteristics make this poem a sonnet?
2. Whom is the speaker addressing, and what literary devices does the speaker employ in doing so? Describe the tone of the poem.
3. What scientific principle is referred to in line 2? Explain. How is this reference somewhat ironic in this context?
4. 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?
5. What are the purpose and the effect of the rhetorical questions the speaker asks?
6. What do you think is the “treasure in the jewelled skies” (line 7)?
7. What other literary device is used in line 9, and what is its effect?
8. 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.

1. Describe the rhythm and sound of the poem, as well as the effect of the speaker’s metrical and sonic choices.
2. 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?
3. Why do you think the speaker specifically mentions “Gentlemen”?

4. 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?

Writing Prompt

Choose two of the three poems to compare and contrast in terms of style, tone, and theme. Incorporate specific details from the poems into your discussion to develop your interpretations and support your arguments.