

**Sample Literature Abstracts**  
*Nineteenth Century Literature*, 50.4 (1996)

Arthur Brown, "Literature and the Impossibility of Death: Poe's 'Berenice'"

Maurice Blanchot writes that death is "man's greatest hope," for it "raises existence to being" and "is within each one of us as our most human quality." Literature, on the other hand, "manifests existence without being, existence which remains below existence, like an inexorable affirmation, without beginning or end--death as the impossibility of dying." Poe's stories of premature burial and of the dead coming back to life dramatize the horror of the impossibility of dying that is made present in the existence of literature. In "Berenice" our attention as readers to the details of the tale, our willingness to be told what "should not be told," reproduces the narrator's obsession with the teeth of Berenice--with that which speaks of death and does not die--and implicates us in his violation of the still-living Berenice in her tomb. The destruction of Berenice--of the living being that can die--and the telling of "Berenice" coincide. Heightening our awareness of the literary act in which we are engaged, Poe forces us to enter the tale itself. Only in our own mortality do we find a way out.

Sharon Setzer, "Precedent and Perversity in Wordsworth's Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death"

First published in 1840, at the height of the controversy over capital punishment in England, Wordsworth's *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death* counter the movement toward political reform through their massive appeal to ancient history, poetical history, and the history of poetic form. While Wordsworth attempts to ground his authority in the biblical history reconstituted in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the classical history of Lucius Junius Brutus recuperated during the French Revolution, his argument for the political imperative of the death penalty is inextricably bound up with the aesthetic imperatives of the sonnet form. The sonnet series as a whole thus betrays a perverse appropriation of literary and historical precedent as well as an uncritical acceptance of Petrarchan conventions.

Elliot Vanskike, "Consistent Inconsistencies: the Transvestite Actress Madame Vestris and Charlotte Brontë's Shirley"

In this paper I propose the transvestite actress Madame Vestris as an interpretive doppelgänger for the title character in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley*. Vestris crossed gender lines not only in her cross-dressed performances on the Victorian stage but also in her incursion into the male-dominated realm of theater ownership. In this way she is like Shirley Keeldar, the fiercely independent female factory owner whom Brontë consistently depicts in masculine terms. Most critics read *Shirley* as a narrative and thematic fiasco because the protofeminist momentum that the novel accumulates from Brontë's portrayal of an independent, headstrong female character is brought to a halt when Shirley subjugates herself to a meek and weasly man. The ending of the novel has been almost unanimously dismissed as Brontë's submission to the very patriarchal culture that she set out to critique when she created the character of Shirley Keeldar. However, far from being the low point of Brontë's writing, the ending of the novel elevates the writing into

a high satirical mode that only serves to intensify Brontë's criticism of society's treatment of women. Through reading Shirley by means of the narrative and gender disruptions that Vestris's performances staged, we can understand this curious narrative reversal at the end of the novel as a motivated strategy on the part of Brontë, not a lapse of craft.

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*Style*, 30.2 (1996)

Michael Simpson, "Who Didn't Kill Blake's Fly: Moral Law and the Rule of Grammar in 'Songs of Experience.'"

Criticism of Blake's 'The Fly' has routinely maintained that it is an especially cryptic poem, but has also assumed that the 'events' portrayed in it are utterly stable. Those events, however, have been actively stabilized by critical readings that relate the poem, consciously or otherwise, to literary antecedents that insist on a particular kind of plot. What exposes this stabilization of the plot as an interpretation of the text is the possibility of alternative grammars that the criticism has overlooked. Since the criticism tends to castigate the poem's narrator because of his part in the postulated plot, this criticism becomes susceptible to its own strictures once this narrator is seen as a construction based on a certain reading of the poem's grammar. Even though a few accounts of the poem find only a sensitive narrator, both positive and negative characterizations of the narrator share a common and mistaken assumption of their distance from the poem. Chastizing a destructive narrator presumes the distance of a moral superiority from him; congratulating a sensitive narrator presumes the distance of a Humean sympathy. Both of these assumptions are challenged once the poem's grammar is seen to be unstable enough to require the reader's involvement in the text.

Daniel P. Jaeckle, "Imaging Social Languages in Marvell's The Last Instructions."

In "The Last Instructions to a Painter" Marvell frequently satirizes the powerful of his society by creating images of the languages that they speak. The poem thus lends itself to analysis in terms of the descriptive categories that Bakhtin has developed for the novel. The Last Instructions uses what Bakhtin calls hybridization, parodic stylization, parody, stylization, and variation to place the social languages to be satirized in opposition to the language of the persona. As a result, Marvell exposes both the linguistic habits by means of which those in power delude themselves and others, and the poverty of the received languages of praise in light of the moral decay of his society.

Richard Badenhansen. "Representing Experience and Reasserting Identity: The Rhetoric of Combat in British Literature of World War I."

This essay proposes a psycholexicological model that ties the way language emerges in consciously literary treatments of the Great War to both the taxing psychological conditions of the fighting and the soldier-writer's concomitant need to ground the self, gain control, and finally assert power. Like many oppressed groups that use linguistic strategies such as slang and other forms of coded language to create a self-contained community, protect themselves from the

oppressor, and finally subvert that authority, the writers of the Great War invented a rhetoric of combat that allowed them to express their frustrations, doubts, and fears covertly without overtly challenging the supremacy of the military system or risking the dire consequences that usually followed such a challenge. Far from passive, objective recorders of the "truth" happening around them (the traditional view of most First World War soldier-writers), literary participants actually took a far more active approach in inventing a discourse that gave them the authority not only to chronicle experience but to shape it in a particular fashion; and they did so in the face of a linguistic system (army discourse) that inherently threatened identity.