Letters to a Young Poet

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAINER MARIA RILKE

Rainer Maria Rilke was born in Prague in 1875. His father worked for the railroad after a failed stint in the military. Rilke had a somewhat strained relationship with his mother, who was in mourning during his childhood because her daughter had died in infancy before Rilke was born. As a result, she often treated Rilke as if he were the little girl she'd lost. In 1886, at the age of 11, Rilke attended a military academy in the Austrian city of Sankt Pölten. He detested his time there, as he was brutally bullied for his sensitivity. In fact, he had such a hard time at military school that he later suggested that it was necessary for him to completely block out the memory of his experience there in order to make anything of himself as an artist. He lasted for five years at the school before leaving to attend trade school, from which he was expelled in 1892. He was then tutored at home until 1895. It was during this period that he wrote his first collection of poetry, *Life and Songs*, which was published in 1894. He spent a brief period attending the Charles-Ferdinand University in Prague, but he soon left school and moved to Munich, where he became acquainted with other writers and started working seriously on his own writing. He published a number of poetry collections in the ensuing years, including *The Book of Hours*, a three-part book that he worked on between 1899 and 1903. He also wrote several plays and short stories, though none of them are considered his finest work. However, his novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* is one of his best-known pieces of writing and explores themes he constantly struggled with in both his poetry and his life—themes having to do with God, solitude, and life's incomprehensibility. For the majority of his life, Rilke faced illness and was often unwell, eventually dying of leukemia in 1926.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For the most part, *Letters to a Young Poet* is a timeless collection of Rilke's writing, since the advice he gives the young poet isn't tied to any specific historical events. However, Rilke wrote the letters at a somewhat transitional period in his own life as an artist, since his three-part collection, *The Book of Hours*, had, by 1902 (when he wrote his first letter to Franz Xaver Kappus), attracted more attention to him than his previous books had. The attention was partly due to the fact that *The Book of Hours* showed a new level of seriousness and skill in his work. He'd been writing poetry for a long time, but the early 1900s saw a turning point of sorts for his craft. He went on to publish another famous collection of poems, *The Book of Images*, and he eventually published his well-known novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, in 1910—just two years after his final letter to Franz Xaver Kappus. In general, his work in the early 1900s illustrated his gradual shift away from romanticism and toward modernism, which is why many readers view Rilke as an important literary figure in the transitional period that took place in the late-19th and early 20th-centuries.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Rilke's novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* is worth considering alongside *Letters to a Young Poet*, since both the letters and the novel draw on certain elements of Rilke's own life. In particular, both works spotlight his thoughts about the nature of solitude, loneliness, and the difficulties of leading a religious life in the modern era. Rilke was influenced by similar themes found in the novel *Niels Lyhne* by the Danish author Jens Peter Jacobsen. He actually references Jacobsen in *Letters to a Young Poet*, urging the young poet to read a story collection by Jacobsen in addition to reading *Niels Lyhne*. He tells Kappus that, alongside the sculptor Auguste Rodin, Jacobsen has been one of his biggest influences. Rilke also writes to Kappus about the work of Richard Dehmel, a German poet who often wrote about love and romance. Rilke admires his work but sees it as too passionate and lustful, preferring writing that approaches love in less pointedly sexual ways, since he thinks sex itself is much more complicated and beautiful than the result of feverish desire. He was also significantly influenced by Lou Andreas-Salomé, a Russian writer and psychoanalyst with whom he had a very close relationship. In addition to her works of fiction and poetry, Andreas-Salomé was the first female psychoanalyst. She met Rilke when he was only 21 and taught him Russian, urging him to read writers like Leo Tolstoy and Alexander Pushkin.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Letters to a Young Poet
- **When Written:** 1902-1908
- **When Published:** 1929
- **Literary Period:** Rilke wrote *Letters* in a transitional period, when both Romanticism and Victorianism were fading from popularity and the Modernist movement was beginning to take shape.
- **Genre:** Epistolary Nonfiction
- **Setting:** Various European cities between 1902 and 1908
- **Climax:** N/A
- **Antagonist:** Fear of solitude and difficulty

EXTRA CREDIT

Kappus's Writing. Although Franz Xaver Kappus was never well-known in his own right, he did put Rilke's advice about art to use as writer, ultimately publishing seven novels and composing a handful of screenplays.

The Mentor's Mentor. While the young Franz Kappus looked to Rilke for inspiration, Rilke himself greatly admired the work of sculptor Auguste Rodin—so much, in fact, that he worked for a short while as Rodin's secretary.

PLOT SUMMARY

As a 19-year-old student, Franz Xaver Kappus wrote to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke to ask for advice about his own poetry. A long, in-depth correspondence ensued, and *Letters to a Young Poet* comprises ten of Rilke's letters to the young man.

In his first response, Rilke thanks the young poet for his letter but says he can't provide much insight into Kappus's poems. He *did* read them, but there's not much to say, since literary criticism pales in comparison to poetry itself. People think most things in life can be described in words, but Rilke disagrees—so much of life is "inexpressible," and analytical writing often fails to grasp the true nature of poetry. Nonetheless, Rilke can tell Kappus that his poems lack a unique style. Two of them show promise, but they still feel generic. On the whole, Rilke advises Kappus not to seek out approval from others. Nobody can tell him if his work is good—not even Rilke. Instead of thinking about such things, Kappus should simply ask himself if he *needs* to write. Would he die if he couldn't? If so, then he should do everything in his power to create favorable conditions for writing. He should take an interest in the world, appreciating all its beauty and splendor. Through close attention to everyday existence, his poetry will improve—and so will his life.

Rilke's second letter to Kappus warns the young poet about irony. If Kappus finds himself overusing it, he should think about great works of art and other "serious" things, since irony falls short in such circumstances. Once he masters when and how to use it, though, irony will become a powerful tool that will enhance his writing. Rilke also urges Kappus to read the work of the Danish writer Peter Jacobsen, noting that he himself has learned a lot from artists like Jacobsen and the sculptor Auguste Rodin.

The third letter responds to a thought Kappus had regarding the introduction to one of Jacobsen's books. Kappus disagrees with the person who wrote the introduction, and Rilke praises him for his skepticism. He tells Kappus to rarely read literary criticism. Instead, he should trust his own opinions; even if they're wrong, Kappus will most likely come to the right conclusion eventually, so he should just be patient. Rilke then discusses the relationship between art and sex, responding to something Kappus said about the author Richard Dehmel and how it seems like he writes while "in heat." Rilke agrees, finding Dehmel's work interesting but too lustful. By focusing too much on lustful passion, Rilke thinks Dehmel diminishes human sexuality to little more than a narrow, burning desire, which he feels is reductive.

In his fourth letter, Rilke expresses how much he enjoyed Kappus's last response. He thinks Kappus has a "beautiful concern about life," and he notes that any attempt to answer the young poet's probing questions about life would be futile. Nobody could possibly answer the questions Kappus has, so Kappus should learn to live with and love the "questions themselves." Rilke then turns his attention to sex once again, advising Kappus to avoid seeking out sex for the wrong reasons. In Rilke's opinion, most people trivialize sex by using it as a tool to address a certain weariness, yearning for physical intimacy as a means of merely invigorating themselves and avoiding boredom. But sex isn't just a simple fix-all—it's a complex, wonderful thing that can greatly enhance a person's life. For now, though, Kappus should take comfort in his own solitude without worrying too much about sexual relations.

Rilke's fifth letter to Kappus is brief. He has recently arrived in Rome, which he always finds rather depressing at first. The ancient ruins look like little more than random relics of the past, and he finds the city's tourism overwhelming. After a few days, though, he slowly comes to recognize the beauty of the place—after all, there's beauty in *any* city. For Rilke, the everyday wonders of Rome are as rewarding as its most cherished historical sites, and simply paying close attention to the city eventually leads to a broader appreciation of its past.

It's almost Christmas when Rilke writes his sixth letter to Kappus. He knows Kappus will feel the burden of his own solitude on Christmas, but he tells the young poet to embrace this feeling. He must learn to value his lonesomeness and his own private existence. Rilke also addresses some misgivings Kappus has about his job as a military officer, which he thinks is unrewarding and disconnected from the rest of his life. Rilke isn't surprised to hear that Kappus feels this way, but he encourages him to consider the fact that *all* jobs feel mundane and unartistic—no matter what profession Kappus pursued, he would probably feel the exact same way about it. But it's alright if Kappus feels isolated and alone in his profession; it's alright if he doesn't connect with the other people in his field. He can always turn to the wider world—to nature itself—for meaningful connections.

Returning to the topic of solitude, Rilke talks in his seventh letter about the natural impulse to avoid lonesomeness. But Kappus should recognize that turning away from solitude is the easy way out. It is harder—but also more rewarding—to embrace isolation. Many young people rush into romantic relationships because they yearn for companionship, but Rilke thinks it's still very important—perhaps *more* important—for

lovers to have their own sense of solitude. After all, two people can't fully "merge" with one another if they aren't separate individuals to begin with. If lovers unite without fully realizing their own individuality, their relationships don't develop into the rich and rewarding connections that *could* have formed, so rushing into a romantic bond isn't in a person's best interest.

In the same way that he tells Kappus to accept solitude, Rilke tells the young poet in his eighth letter not to turn away from sadness. In a way, sadness signals a certain "transition" in life, since it will eventually pass, leaving people to figure out how to proceed in the wake of their own sorrow. Therefore, sadness contains a fair amount of uncertainty, and Rilke urges Kappus to lean into that uncertainty. No matter what happens, he implies, sadness will lead to personal growth. Similarly, Rilke tells the young poet in his ninth letter to use his feelings of doubt to his advantage. Instead of running from doubt, Kappus should patiently investigate why, exactly, he has such doubts in the first place—a mental exercise that will prove extremely useful, since it will push the young poet to thoughtfully engage with his emotions.

In his final letter to Kappus, which is dated four years after his previous message, Rilke says he's happy that Kappus's job as a military officer has given him the opportunity to spend so much time alone. He envisions Kappus sitting in solitude in the lonely fortress where he has been stationed—an image that brings him joy. In the end, Rilke thinks it's better that Kappus chose the life of an officer instead of working in some arts-adjacent field. Although certain jobs might *seem* to engage with the arts, the truth is that such professions tend to distract people from leading the disciplined life of an artist. All the better, then, that Kappus lives in a "rough reality" in which it's possible to be solitary and serious.

CHARACTERS

Rainer Maria Rilke – Rainer Maria Rilke was an Austrian writer best known for his poetry. *Letters to a Young Poet* is a collection of ten letters written by Rilke to a young man, Franz Xaver Kappus, between 1902 and 1908. In the letters, he serves as a mentor to the young Kappus, giving him advice that applies to both poetry and life in general. He admits that he experiences many of the same doubts and misgivings that Kappus expresses, suggesting that the only reason he's able to offer advice in the first place is that he often thinks about such matters in his own life. In keeping with this, Rilke's discipline shines through in his writing to Kappus, as he frequently emphasizes the importance of solitude and the usefulness of embracing difficulty. He doesn't want Kappus to turn away from a lonesome lifestyle, since this kind of social isolation gives artists the time and focus they need to explore their own internal worlds. Paying close attention to everyday life and all of its small wonders will, according to Rilke, strengthen Kappus's capabilities as a poet while simultaneously enriching his life. For Rilke, then, art and life are closely related. In fact, it seems likely that he sees very little distinction between the two things. He implies that a keen artistic sensibility enriches life, and—in turn—that living a full life sharpens that artistic sensibility. Life and art are therefore intertwined for Rilke, who makes a great effort to help Kappus lead an existence that is artistically and personally rewarding. He shows the young poet quite a bit of emotional support, making it clear that he takes his role as an older mentor very seriously—something that hints at his kindness.

Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet) – Franz Xaver Kappus was an Austrian writer and military officer. He was 19 when he decided to write a letter to Rainer Maria Rilke, whose poetry he greatly admired. *Letters to a Young Poet* includes an introduction by Kappus but not the letters he sent to Rilke. Nonetheless, Rilke's responses suggest that Kappus wrote to the older poet about a wide array of topics, including his own poetry, loneliness, religion, doubt, and love. Judging by Rilke's comments about the beginnings of Kappus's profession as a military officer, it seems that Kappus himself was unsure whether or not he really wanted to pursue such a career, worrying that it wouldn't give him enough time to write and lead the life of an artist. But Rilke tells him to simply keep tabs on how his job impacts his life as a poet. Later, when Kappus complains that he feels a disconnect between his profession and his artistic sensibilities, Rilke tells him not to worry about that disconnect—he would feel isolated from his creative side in *any* job. In his final letter, Rilke says he's glad to know that Kappus has been stationed by the military in a place full of solitude and quiet, where the young poet can spend time with his thoughts. Over the course of their correspondence, Rilke's responses imply that Kappus has matured and has managed to apply their conversation to his everyday life, ultimately indicating that Kappus saw Rilke as a mentor and took his advice to heart.

Professor Horaček – Professor Horaček was one of Franz Xaver Kappus's professors at the military academy in the Austrian city of Wiener Neustadt. Horaček also taught Rainer Maria Rilke when the poet was a young man attending the Lower Military School in Sankt Pölten, Austria. Kappus was inspired to write a letter to Rilke after learning that he was one of Horaček's former students.

TERMS

Jens Peter Jacobsen – Jens Peter Jacobsen was a Danish writer who lived from 1847 to 1885. He is known for popularizing the Naturalist literary movement in Denmark. **Rainer Maria Rilke** admired his writing, taking a special interest in his novel *Niels Lyhne* and a collection of his short stories.

Richard Dehmel – Richard Dehmel was a popular German poet who lived from 1863 to 1920. Although **Rilke** enjoyed Dehmel's poetry, both he and **Kappus** thought that Dehmel wrote a bit too feverishly and passionately.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SOLITUDE AND DIFFICULTY

In *Letters to a Young Poet*, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke advises a younger writer, Franz Xaver Kappus, to lead a solitary, disciplined life. Instead of fearing loneliness and trying to avoid it, Rilke suggests that solitude is something to be embraced. It's only natural for people to shy away from solitude by seeking out the company of others and rushing into romantic relationships. But there's a certain richness to be found in spending time alone—even prisoners experiencing complete isolation, Rilke suggests, ought to be able to keep themselves company by delving into their own internal worlds. Similarly, Kappus should learn to take comfort in the prospect of spending time on his own, as Rilke believes that "going-into-oneself and for hours meeting no one" is perhaps the most valuable skill a person can have. The implication here is that having the courage to engage in genuine introspection is actually quite rewarding. If Kappus shows the bravery and patience to really excavate his own thoughts without distraction, Rilke hints that the young man will become a wonderful poet and—moreover—a confident and well-rounded individual.

But Rilke also acknowledges that the act of "going-into-oneself" isn't particularly easy. Being alone often means sitting silently with difficult emotions, which can be daunting. And yet, Rilke finds value in this kind of emotional "suffering," viewing sadness as something that leads to change. When people experience sadness, he says, there's a sense of "transition" because they realize that the sadness itself will eventually pass, which means they'll be forced to find a way forward in the wake of their sorrow. In other words, change and growth often emerge from difficult emotional experiences—experiences that are all the more intense when people give them their full, undivided attention. In turn, Rilke's letters champion solitude because it gives people the time and space to grapple with difficult emotions, which can greatly enrich a person's life.

ART, LIFE, AND UNCERTAINTY

Rilke's letters to Kappus center around his ideas about art and poetry, but the advice he gives is also applicable to life in a broader sense. He argues that moving through the world with an artistic sensibility can add interest and wonder to everyday life, turning it into something special and worthy of attention. Rilke urges Kappus to appreciate "the little things that hardly anyone sees," which won't just enhance his poetry but also nourish his "inmost consciousness"—in other words, learning to look at the world with curiosity will do much more than help Kappus write interesting poems: it will expand his mind and open him up to the world.

However, living with this kind of artistic curiosity often means learning to accept a degree of uncertainty. After all, Rilke believes that life is a lot less "comprehensible" than most people assume. Certain things, he maintains, are simply "inexpressible," since the world is full of mystery. To move through life with a curious, poetic mindset therefore requires people to accept ambiguity, even if society at large has developed a "fear of the inexplicable." Rilke's comments about learning to live with uncertainty apply to both life and art, since he maintains that poems are often impossible to fully comprehend and describe using "critical words," suggesting that he sees poetry as just as vast and complex as life itself—an outlook that makes sense, considering that he doesn't actually seem to recognize much of a distinction between art and life in the first place. Rather, he sees art as just another "way of living," meaning that the same openness to uncertainty that Kappus cultivates in his daily life will feed into his poetry, and vice versa.

PATIENCE AND SELF-ASSURANCE

A fair amount of the advice Rilke offers in *Letters to a Young Poet* might seem daunting and hard to accept, especially since he emphasizes the importance of embracing difficulty, solitude, and even sadness. But above all, he urges the young poet to develop a quiet, levelheaded sense of patience, which will help him when he grapples with life's many difficulties. If Kappus is willing to patiently work through feelings like doubt and sadness, he will only stand to benefit from the experience. Patience therefore becomes a necessary skill for anyone who wants to lead a thoughtful, poetic life.

In some ways, the kind of patience Rilke has in mind is straightforward and practical. For instance, in his very first letter to Kappus, he warns the young man about attempting difficult poetic forms before he's ready. He tells him, in other words, to patiently let his poetic talents develop before he plunges into more challenging waters. His advice is practical and tangible, but it also feeds into Rilke's larger ideas about developing a patient sense of self-assurance. Although he

thinks the young poet should wait to work on challenging poetic forms, he *also* tells him to trust himself and his own artistic intuitions. Kappus should have faith in himself—and according to Rilke, having faith in oneself means letting opinions take shape slowly, giving them the time to form in "undisturbed development." He insists that "*everything* is gestation and then bringing forth," essentially highlighting the value of allowing ideas to gradually build—allowing them to "gestate"—for however long is necessary. And once these ideas are fully formed, it will be that much easier for the young poet to confidently stand by his own worldview, ultimately suggesting that slow, unhurried thoughtfulness provides a path toward self-assurance and peace of mind.

MENTORSHIP AND GUIDANCE

Letters to a Young Poet provides insight into Rilke's mentorship of younger artists. Although he was only 27 when he began corresponding with 19-year-old Franz Kappus, it's clear that he took his role as a more experienced poet quite seriously—he did, after all, send ten letters to Kappus, many of which were lengthy and philosophically dense. Furthermore, he *genuinely* thought about what would help the young poet develop as both a writer and a human. Several of the letters begin with Rilke saying that he has been thinking extensively about Kappus and planning a response for quite some time. And although he tells Kappus in the first letter that he can't comment on his poems, he later finds himself so moved by one of Kappus's sonnets that he copies it out, sending it along with his response so that the young poet can read his own words in another person's hand. There's no doubt, then, that Rilke's personal investment in Kappus's growth becomes more pronounced over time, as he gets to know the young man and tries to help him realize his potential as both an artist and a person.

But their correspondence isn't just for Kappus's benefit, since it's clear that Rilke himself thinks extensively in his own life about the things he discusses with the young poet. In a way, then, his role as Kappus's mentor gives him a chance to work out ideas with which he himself struggles. He admits this at the end of the eighth letter, saying that he experiences the same "difficulty and sadness" as Kappus, which is the only reason he's able to come up with words that might comfort him. Although Rilke believes so strongly in the value of solitude, then, it becomes clear that he also recognizes the importance of developing meaningful relationships with like-minded artists—relationships that give him an opportunity to further explore his own ideas.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE SONNET

When Rilke writes out one of Kappus's sonnets (so that the young poet can read his own poetry in someone else's handwriting), the sonnet itself symbolizes the strange mystery of the creative process. Rilke tells Kappus that reading his own words in an unfamiliar hand will allow him to truly appreciate the power and beauty of the sonnet in a new way. On a certain level, it makes sense that this technique would help Kappus see his poetry with new eyes, since the relative unfamiliarity of Rilke's handwriting creates a sense of emotional distance between Kappus and the sonnet. More importantly, though, this little trick suggests that the entire creative process is quite subjective and complex. The mere fact that Rilke went to the trouble of writing out the poem for Kappus reveals just how hard it is for artists to step back and assess their own work, since it's difficult for people to accurately evaluate things they've spent so much time thinking about. As a result, the sonnet itself comes to represent the challenge artists face when trying to gain clarity about their work.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W.W. Norton edition of *Letters to a Young Poet* published in 1993.

Letter 1 Quotes

❝ With nothing can one approach a work of art so little as with critical words: they always come down to more or less happy misunderstandings. Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered, and more inexpressible than all else are works of art, mysterious existences, the life of which, while ours passes away, endures.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

In his first letter to Franz Xaver Kappus, Rilke tries to help the young poet see that art—and, in fact, life itself—isn't as categorizable and tangible as most people would like to

think. He brings this up as a way of explaining why he can't say anything terribly specific about Kappus's poems. According to Rilke, "critical words" (that is, analysis) fail to summon ideas that actually apply to poetry, which is too mysterious to pick apart and describe. To that end, life is full of "events" that are "inexpressible." By establishing his interest in the strange, "inexpressible" aspects of existence, Rilke encourages the young poet to open himself up to life's many mysteries. Embracing uncertainty is at the heart of Rilke's approach to both life and art, so it makes sense that he begins his correspondence with Kappus by urging him to acknowledge the many shortcomings of human understanding. Sometimes, Rilke implies, it's enough to simply *feel* the indescribable beauty of something instead of trying to fully grasp it.

> You ask me whether your verses are good. You ask me. You have asked others before. You send them to magazines. You compare them with other poems, and you are disturbed when certain editors reject your efforts. Now (since you have allowed me to advise you) I beg you to give up all that. You are looking outward, and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Rilke wants Kappus to set aside his desire for affirmation and approval. The young poet wants to know if his poetry is good, but Rilke suggests that Kappus shouldn't even be thinking about such things. He is, after all, still developing as poet, so he should focus on the work itself instead of turning to others in the hopes that they'll tell him something encouraging or valuable about his writing. Rilke's advice in this section of the letter is applicable to most new writers who are eager to make a name for themselves. If new poets fixate on whether or not their work is good, they'll have less energy to devote to the actual act of composing and—thus—improving. As such, when Rilke says, "Nobody can counsel and help you," he isn't trying to discourage Kappus, he's simply trying to show him that writing is a solitary endeavor. No matter what anyone says about Kappus's poetry, nobody but Kappus himself can make any true difference to his craft, which is why he should devote himself to writing rather than seeking outside opinions.

> Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; [...] acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all—ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: *must* I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple "I *must*," then build your life according to this necessity; your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and a testimony to it.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

After telling Kappus that nobody will truly be able to help him with his writing, Rilke says that there's really only one way to approach poetry: Kappus must ask himself if he absolutely *needs* to write. Rilke's suggestion here indicates that he takes poetry very seriously. It's not something a person can casually choose to do—rather, it's something that certain people *have* to do. And if this sense of necessity is what it takes to become a poet, then the implication must be that poetry itself is a difficult and thankless endeavor. Kappus should only pursue it, Rilke implies, if he feels compelled to do so. And if this is the case, then he should devote himself wholeheartedly to moving through the world like an artist. Above all, Rilke's advice in this section suggests that Kappus should structure his entire life around the creation of poetry, ultimately underscoring how committed Rilke is to the idea of living an artistic life.

> If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches; for to the creator there is no poverty and no poor indifferent place.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

If Kappus decides to devote himself to poetry, Rilke suggests that he should start by focusing on his daily life. Instead of writing love poems or working in other celebrated poetic traditions, he should simply turn his attention to his own existence—after all, love poems and other forms are deceptively challenging and require a certain poetic mastery. For the time being, then, Rilke thinks Kappus would benefit from taking a renewed interest in the little things that make up his own life. However, Rilke acknowledges in this section of the letter that Kappus's everyday existence might seem uninteresting and "poor." But the young poet shouldn't take such thoughts at face value. Rather than ignoring the things around him because they seem mundane and boring, he should "blame" himself for failing to "call forth [the] riches" of normal life. An artist, Rilke suggests, is capable of finding beauty and intrigue in *anything*. By encouraging Kappus to tap into the many wonders of everyday life, then, Rilke helps him develop an artistic and open-minded way of seeing the world, thus strengthening his poetry while also enriching his day-to-day existence.

> And if out of this turning inward, out of this absorption into your own world *verses* come, then it will not occur to you to ask anyone whether they are good *verses*..[sic] Nor will you try to interest magazines in your poems: for you will see in them your fond natural possession, a fragment and a voice of your life. A work of art is good if it has sprung from necessity. In this nature of its origin lies the judgment of it: there is no other.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Rilke has already told Kappus not to seek out approval from other people when it comes to his own poetry. Nobody, Rilke says, can tell him if his poems are good or bad. He now suggests that the only way to know if a work of art is any good is by considering whether or not it has "sprung from necessity." If Kappus devotes himself to writing poetry because he knows he simply *must* write, and if his poems convey this urgent need, then he'll know they're good. What's most interesting about this piece of advice is that it challenges the idea that anyone could ever pass judgment on Kappus's work. A magazine might decide to publish one of his poems, but even this wouldn't actually tell him anything about the quality of the writing. Rilke therefore encourages Kappus to shift the way he thinks about artistic creation, urging the young man to stop thinking about *quality* and start thinking about *authenticity*. If his poetry is authentic in the way it communicates his burning need to express himself, then he will know it's successful—there's no other way, Rilke argues, to think about art.

Letter 2 Quotes

> Seek the depth of things: thither irony never descends—and when you come thus close to the edge of greatness, test out at the same time whether this ironic attitude springs from a necessity of your nature. For under the influence of serious things either it will fall from you (if it is something fortuitous), or else it will (if it really innately belongs to you) strengthen into a stern instrument and take its place in the series of tools with which you will have to shape your art.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Rilke wants Kappus to sharpen his skills as a writer by learning how to control the techniques he uses. With this in mind, Rilke notes that Kappus shouldn't overuse irony. If the young poet thinks he might be leaning on irony a bit too much, he should "seek the depth of things," or think about something in a serious, well-considered way. If his impulse to use irony is just a knee-jerk reaction to something, then it will most likely recede on its own in the face of deep, serious matters. But if Kappus still finds himself wanting to use irony when thinking about something serious, then he'll know that he's using irony as a legitimate tool. From there, he can further hone his ability to wield this tool, which will only help him strengthen his poetic skills.

Rilke's thoughts here about irony are interesting, but what's most important is the broader idea that anything Kappus uses to express himself in his poetry ought to be thoughtful and intentional. Indeed, he shouldn't use a literary device simply because it's the first thing that comes to mind. Instead, he should patiently think about the best way to convey what he wants to convey.

Letter 3 Quotes

❝ Works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing so little to be reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp and hold and be just toward them. Consider *yourself* and your feeling right every time with regard to every such argumentation, discussion or introduction; if you are wrong after all, the natural growth of your inner life will lead you slowly and with time to other insights. Leave to your opinions their own quiet undisturbed development, which, like all progress, must come from deep within and cannot be pressed or hurried by anything. *Everything* is gestation and then bringing forth.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In response to something Kappus said in his own letter about disagreeing with a literary critic, Rilke commends the young poet for his intelligent point of view. He then outlines his own belief that literary criticism isn't suited for assessing works of art, since art is made up of "an infinite loneliness." One way of thinking about Rilke's point here is that art often examines and brings to life things that are otherwise inexpressible and nearly impossible to grasp. The only way to understand these works of art, then, is through the art itself. Therefore, Rilke tells Kappus not to pay attention to criticism and to instead prioritize his *own* reaction to a work of art. Even if his response to something is misguided, Rilke assures him that time will help him come to better conclusions. In other words, Rilke encourages the young poet to patiently give his own opinions the time to take shape and blossom, all the while having confidence in his thoughts. When Rilke says that "*everything* is gestation and then bringing forth," he indicates that life is all about taking in new information, patiently forming ideas about that information, and then bringing those ideas to fruition.

❝ Being an artist means, not reckoning and counting, but ripening like the tree which does not force its sap and stands confident in the storms of spring without the fear that after them may come no summer. It does come. But it comes only to the patient, who are there as though eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly still and wide. I learn it daily, learn it with pain to which I am grateful: *patience* is everything!

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Rilke emphasizes the importance of cultivating patience as an artist. Instead of constantly thinking about his own artistic output, Kappus should accept that creativity comes in waves—or, to use the simile that Rilke himself uses, creativity comes around like the passing seasons. Although it might *seem* during springtime storms like the summer will never arrive, trees never worry about whether or not warmer days will come. Instead, they stand strong until it's finally time to blossom. Artistic creativity is similar, but Rilke implies that some artists fret that their ability to create will leave them forever. As a result, they try to force themselves to make art even when they're not inspired, rushing into the creative process instead of patiently biding their time. Because Rilke thinks art and life are so closely connected, he sees nothing wrong with simply devoting oneself to living in an artistic way until some kind of inspiration comes along and makes it possible to create something beautiful again. Patience, then, is one of the most crucial things an artist can have.

Letter 4 Quotes

❝ If you will cling to Nature, to the simple in Nature, to the little things that hardly anyone sees, and that can so unexpectedly become big and beyond measuring; if you have this love of inconsiderable things and seek quite simply, as one who serves, to win the confidence of what seems poor: then everything will become easier, more coherent and somehow more conciliatory for you, not in your intellect, perhaps, which lags marveling behind, but in your inmost consciousness, waking and cognizance.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In his fourth letter to Kappus, Rilke acknowledges that he can't answer all of the young poet's deep questions and

concerns about life. In fact, he says that *nobody* can answer these questions. Therefore, he urges Kappus to immerse himself in everyday life, saying that he should continue to ponder his deep questions while simply going about his regular existence. By paying attention to "the little things that hardly anyone sees," everything in Kappus's life will—according to Rilke—become "easier" and "more coherent." The idea of "coherence" is interesting, as it suggests that paying attention to the small wonders of everyday life will actually help Kappus *make sense* of the world; in other words, his engagement with his surroundings will partially answer the otherwise unanswerable questions he has about life. Rilke has already made it quite clear that he thinks life is often mysterious and "inexpressible," but now he implies that there's still a way to understand it. But this understanding is a *general* kind of understanding, not necessarily a tangible answer. Interacting and engaging with life's small wonders is a way of getting in touch with the vast, incomprehensible nature of existence, even if this vague understanding only takes place in the "inmost consciousness."

❝ You are so young, so before all beginning, and I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Building on his point that nobody could possibly answer Kappus's deep questions about life, Rilke tells the young poet to embrace mystery and intangibility. He should learn to *enjoy* the feeling of wonder and confusion instead of trying to quickly find answers to all his questions. In other words, Rilke emphasizes how rewarding it can be to embrace a sense of incomprehension and curiosity, both of which aid the artistic process of creation by turning it into an open-minded exploration. By learning to "love the *questions themselves*," Kappus will feed his curiosity and keep his interest in life fresh and inspiring. But if he obsesses over answers instead of appreciating the process of inquiry, then he will certainly become an unhappy person, since—as Rilke has already noted—the majority of his questions are unanswerable. And in order to learn how to "love the *questions themselves*," Kappus simply needs to be patient with himself and accept that many things will remain "unsolved in [his] heart."

Letter 6 Quotes

❝ Going-into-oneself and for hours meeting no one—this one must be able to attain. To be solitary, the way one was solitary as a child, when the grownups went around involved with things that seemed important and big because they themselves looked so busy and because one comprehended nothing of their doings.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

More than anything, Rilke tries to show Kappus the importance of solitude, which he believes plays a crucial role in the life of an artist. He talks about being alone as if it's a skill that people must "attain," implying that humans aren't necessarily born with the ability to practice real solitude. And yet, he also suggests that solitude seems to come naturally for children who are forced to entertain themselves while the adults in their lives are busy with other things. The implication here is that people gradually lose their ability to spend time on their own, becoming increasingly swept up in life's many mundane distractions as they get older. In a way, then, Rilke wants Kappus to rediscover a childlike curiosity about his own internal world, which is no less important than anything else. To achieve this kind of curiosity, he must retreat into himself for hours at a time without making plans to see anyone, striving for the kind of unbothered and focused seclusion that children experience when their parents are absorbed in their own affairs.

❝ I know, your profession is hard and full of contradiction of yourself, and I foresaw your complaint and knew that it would come. Now that it has come, I cannot comfort you, I can only advise you to consider whether all professions are not like that, full of demands, full of enmity against the individual, saturated as it were with the hatred of those who have found themselves mute and sullen in a humdrum duty.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36-7

Explanation and Analysis

When Kappus first wrote to Rilke, he was still a student at a military academy. Later in their correspondence, he had already embarked on a career as a military officer, at which point Rilke warned him to pay attention to how the job impacted his ability to lead a serious and solitary life devoted to beauty and art. It now seems that Kappus is unhappy with his profession, and Rilke isn't necessarily surprised.

At the same time, though, Rilke doesn't immediately suggest that Kappus should quit his job as an officer and find something else. Instead, he points out that practically *any* profession would feel just as intrusive and depleting as the one Kappus currently has. All jobs are "full of demands," and most of those "demands" have nothing to do with whether or not the workers feel fulfilled by their duties. Instead of leaving room for people to be individuals with time to pursue their own interests, the vast majority of jobs force people to carry out mundane, "humdrum" tasks. Rilke accepts this as an unfortunate reality of the working world, and his acceptance implies that the only way to respond to such mundanity isn't to search in vain for a new job, but to find ways to still take an interest in life in *spite* of the oppressive boredom of paid labor.

Letter 7 Quotes

And you should not let yourself be confused in your solitude by the fact that there is something in you that wants to break out of it. This very wish will help you, if you use it quietly, and deliberately like a tool, to spread out your solitude over wide country. People have (with the help of conventions) oriented all their solutions toward the easy and toward the easiest side of the easy; but it is clear that we must hold to what is difficult; [...]

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Once again underlining the value of solitude, Rilke points out that it's only natural for Kappus to want to run from his own lonesomeness. It's very human, after all, to seek out company in order to feel a little less alone. But Rilke doesn't think turning away from solitude is a productive thing to do. Rather, he sees it as a defeat of sorts, insisting that people tend to seek out the path of least resistance whenever they're faced with any kind of challenge. Difficulty, though, is something Rilke thinks is worth *embracing*. If Kappus refused to sit with his own solitude, it's unlikely he'd be able to cultivate the kind of introspective attitude that Rilke believes is necessary for a poet to have. Not only does Kappus have to fight his own urge to be with other people, then, he also has to fight societal "conventions" that encourage people to make life as easy as possible, which is why Rilke suggested in his first letter that Kappus should only become a poet if he absolutely *has* to write—after all, seemingly everything in life will work against his efforts to devote himself to poetry. Only someone who *needs* to write, it seems, could withstand the urge to run from solitude.

Love is at first not anything that means merging, giving over, and uniting with another (for what would a union be of something unclarified and unfinished, still subordinate—?), it is a high inducement to the individual to ripen, to become something in himself, to become world, to become world for himself for another's sake, it is a great exacting claim upon him, something that chooses him out and calls him to vast things.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41-2

Explanation and Analysis

Toward the end of his seventh letter to Kappus, Rilke makes the somewhat counterintuitive argument that solitude is *not* at odds with romance and love. Of course, most people would assume the opposite, since solitude usually isn't what comes to mind when a person thinks about a romantic union. But Rilke believes that a true union—a "merging" of two people—can only happen between two individuals who have fully established themselves. Love is therefore something that *encourages* solitude and individuality, inviting people to "ripen" and "become something" in and of themselves. If two lovers have established themselves as

individuals by spending time alone and getting to know themselves, then they will have that much more to offer each other. Their relationship will benefit from their respective individuality, creating something much more complex and powerful than a relationship between two people who *haven't* yet figured out who they are. By outlining this idea, Rilke shows the young poet that the solitude that feeds artistic creativity will also feed his life, preparing him for a much more profound kind of love than he'd be capable of experiencing otherwise.

Letter 8 Quotes

❝ I believe that almost all our sadnesses are moments of tension that we find paralyzing because we no longer hear our surprised feelings living. Because we are alone with the alien thing that has entered into our self; because everything intimate and accustomed is for an instant taken away; because we stand in the middle of a transition where we cannot remain standing. For this reason the sadness too passes: the new thing in us, the added thing, has entered into our heart, has gone into its inmost chamber and is not even there any more,—is already in our blood. And we do not learn what it was. We could easily be made to believe that nothing has happened, and yet we have changed, as a house changes into which a guest has entered.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

In his eighth letter to Kappus, Rilke examines how sadness affects people. More specifically, he suggests that experiencing sadness is like experiencing a "transition," since sadness—just like most things in life—will at some point retreat. There's also the sense that sadness itself overtakes everything else, and when it finally leaves, the emotional landscape it has left behind seems different than it was before. When sorrow comes and goes, Rilke says, people are like a house that has changed because a "guest has entered"—it's not necessarily a profound change, but it's still possible to sense a difference. There is, then, a sense of uncertainty that comes along with sadness, since nobody can know how it will change them. And along with this feeling of uncertainty comes a kind of freedom and newness, as uncertainty creates an opportunity to embrace change. Therefore, Rilke implies that sadness isn't necessarily something that Kappus should shy away from, since it might lead to unforeseeable kinds of growth.

❝ So you must not be frightened, dear Mr. Kappus, if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen; […]. You must think that something is happening with you, that life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall. Why do you want to shut out of your life any agitation, any pain, any melancholy, since you really do not know what these states are working upon you?

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Because sadness can lead to all kinds of personal growth, Rilke tells Kappus not to run from it. His advice in this regard echoes his overall belief that difficult things ought to be embraced. In the same way that Kappus should lean into his own solitude, he should also learn to appreciate sorrow. After all, he doesn't actually *know* how such emotions are "working upon" him, meaning that he has no way of knowing if sadness is bad for him. The natural impulse, of course, is to do whatever is possible to *avoid* sorrow, but Rilke implies that this is an ill-advised impulse because sorrow often leads to positive change. To immediately turn away from it, then, is to cut oneself off from the possibility of healthy emotional growth. Therefore, Kappus shouldn't "shut out" things like emotional pain and melancholy, instead learning to sit with these feelings until he knows what impact they'll have on him.

❝ If there is anything morbid in your processes, just remember that sickness is the means by which an organism frees itself of foreign matter; so one must just help it to be sick, to have its whole sickness and break out with it, for that is its progress. In you, dear Mr. Kappus, so much is now happening; you must be patient as a sick man and confident as a convalescent; for perhaps you are both.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

As Kappus learns to embrace emotional difficulties like sorrow and melancholy, Rilke says, he should recognize that doing so might seem "morbid" and painful. But this kind of emotional discomfort is to be expected. In fact, Rilke believes it's *natural*. In the same way that physical sickness is the body's way of fighting off viruses and bacteria, challenging emotions like sadness can be seen as healing experiences. But dealing with something like sorrow requires strength and patience, just like being sick requires people to wait for their ailments to eventually pass. And yet, Rilke also suggests that Kappus can hold onto a little bit of confidence. Whereas sick people don't always know whether or not they'll get better, Kappus should take heart in the fact that his sadness will recede and leave him a stronger, more well-rounded person. Rilke compares him to a convalescent, or somebody who is already on the path toward recovery. By making this comparison, he emphasizes the importance of self-assurance, implying that it's easiest for people to embrace difficult emotions when they know that doing so will benefit them in the long run.

❝ And if there is one thing more that I must say to you, it is this: Do not believe that he who seeks to comfort you lives untroubled among the simple and quiet words that sometimes do you good. His life has much difficulty and sadness and remains far behind yours. Were it otherwise he would never have been able to find those words.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of his eighth letter to Kappus, Rilke opens up about his own emotions. He subtly acknowledges that his advice might be easier said than done, since he himself struggles quite frequently with the same kind of sadness that Kappus faces. Because he knows how hard it is to deal with this kind of emotion, he makes an effort to assure Kappus that he isn't alone in feeling these things. Kappus also shouldn't assume that Rilke is in perfect control of his own emotional life; just because Rilke is capable of offering some comforting words and a little bit of insight doesn't mean that he's all that good at dealing with his own feelings. To the contrary, Rilke thinks that he's able to offer Kappus solace specifically *because* he knows what it feels like to face down sadness. In turn, Rilke makes an effort to commiserate with Kappus, suggesting that—despite his views about solitude—he greatly values the importance of human connection.

Letter 9 Quotes

❝ And your doubt may become a good quality if you *train it*. It must become *knowing*, it must become critical. Ask it, whenever it wants to spoil something for you, *why* something is ugly, demand proofs from it, test it, and you will find it perplexed and embarrassed perhaps, or perhaps rebellious. But don't give in, insist on arguments and act this way, watchful and consistent, every single time, and the day will arrive when from a destroyer it will become one of your best workers—perhaps the cleverest of all that are building at your life.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

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Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Rilke addresses the fact that Kappus tends to doubt himself and his work. Instead of trying to assure the young poet that he doesn't have any reason to doubt himself, Rilke implores Kappus to use that doubt to his own benefit. If he "train[s]" his doubt, it might become a useful tool that he can use to more thoroughly examine both the outside world, his own poetry, and his overall thought process. But in order to train it, he will need to scrutinize it very carefully. Whenever he doubts something, he'll have to interrogate that feeling to discover *why*, exactly, it cropped up. And though doing this deep dive on his own misgivings might feel foolish, Rilke insists that Kappus must not give up, always tracing the feeling back to its very root. At the heart of this advice is the idea that Kappus should take his feelings and opinions quite seriously instead of simply writing them off. If he can maintain this rigorous, inquisitive way of moving through life, he will benefit as both a poet and a person.

Letter 10 Quotes

❝ Art too is only a way of living, and, however one lives, one can, unwittingly, prepare oneself for it; in all that is real one is closer to it and more nearly neighbored than in the unreal half-artistic professions, which, while they pretend proximity to some art, in practice belie and assail the existence of all art, as for instance the whole of journalism does and almost all criticism and three-quarters of what is called and wants to be called literature. I am glad, in a word, that you have surmounted the danger of falling into this sort of thing and are somewhere in a rough reality being solitary and courageous.

Related Characters: Rainer Maria Rilke (speaker), Franz Xaver Kappus (The Young Poet)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In his final letter to Kappus, Rilke says that he's glad the young poet has continued his career as a military officer, since it seems that this profession allows him to lead a serious life with plenty of solitude. Rilke thinks Kappus wouldn't be better off in any other profession, especially ones that are in some way related to art. Kappus's job as an officer forces him to do something completely unrelated to art, but it ends up creating the right conditions for him to move through the world in an artistic way. If he had a job that was somehow involved in the arts, though, the position would surely deplete his creative capabilities and leave no room for his own artistic endeavors. Consequently, Rilke frowns on the idea of a literary writer pursuing a job in journalism or criticism, thinking that these careers are unfit for anyone who wants to make true art. He therefore applauds Kappus's military career, making it clear that he sees art as a "way of living," not a job.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

A writer named Franz Xaver Kappus explains that he was reading poetry by Rainer Maria Rilke while sitting in a park in Wiener-Neustadt, Austria. One of his professors at the Military Academy stopped to speak with him and examined the book in his hands. The professor, Horaček, knew Rilke when he was a young student in military school, remembering him as a quiet and serious fellow who was often by himself. When Rilke went on to Military College, it became clear that he didn't have the temperament for military life, so he left and completed his studies in Prague. Hearing about Rilke, Kappus decided to write him—a decision that led to a rich and rewarding correspondence.

The introduction briefly contextualizes the ten letters that make up Letters to a Young Poet. *Moreover, it reveals that Kappus was (as the title indicates) quite young when his correspondence with Rilke began. Indeed, he was still a student in military school, so the chance to communicate with Rilke—a well-known poet—was undoubtedly quite significant, most likely influencing the way Kappus viewed the world as a young man.*

LETTER 1

Rilke thanks Kappus for his letter and says that his thanks is all he can offer: he can't comment on the poems Kappus included with his note. Literary criticism is beyond him, especially because he believes criticism is a poor way of approaching art. Any critical insight about poetry that *seems* illuminating is actually nothing more than a pleasant "misunderstanding." Things in life aren't as tangible and easy to understand as most people think—instead, life is deeply mysterious.

Rilke's first letter establishes the respect he has for the indescribable nature of art and life. Although it might seem like he's just trying to avoid commenting on Kappus's poems, the real reason he doesn't want to offer many remarks runs much deeper: he doesn't think analytical criticism has much value in the first place. He'd rather let art exist as a strange, almost unknowable thing than try to break it down with analysis.

Although he can't speak at length about Kappus's poems, Rilke does say that they lack a unique style. Some of the poems have promise and hint at a more personal, individual sensibility, but they still fall short. They don't stand on their own, and Rilke recognizes that Kappus himself seems to recognize their shortcomings, since he expressed misgivings about his work in his original letter.

Rilke doesn't worry about hurting Kappus's feelings when he talks about his poetry. After all, Kappus asked for his thoughts and his advice. However, Rilke only speaks broadly about the poems in question, mainly commenting on the overall style *of Kappus's writing instead of focusing on specific lines, words, or other technical elements. But his overarching comment is actually quite insightful, as it suggests that Kappus hasn't given himself time to really develop into a unique and individual poet.*

But Rilke can't tell Kappus whether or not his poetry is good—*nobody* can. Kappus has sought approval from magazines, hoping they'll publish him, but Rilke warns him about looking beyond himself when thinking about his own poetry. He must learn to look inward. Rilke urges the young poet to ask himself why he writes and, more importantly, if he would die if he had to stop. If the answer to this question is yes, then Kappus should structure his entire life so that it fulfills his need to write.

Rilke hints at a tendency young artists have to rush into a craft and immediately seek approval for their initial attempts. Kappus, for example, has already sent his poems to magazines in the hopes that they will affirm his artistic efforts. And yet, he's still just a student! Instead of focusing so much on finding approval and encouragement, Rilke thinks Kappus should simply focus on the poetry itself—if, that is, he feels like he must *write. The implication here is that writing poetry is a difficult and thankless task, so Kappus shouldn't pursue it if he's only interested in success or praise.*

Rilke advises the young poet to steer clear of old, traditional poetic forms when he's still starting out. These forms might seem simple, but they actually require great mastery—a love poem, for instance, is deceptively challenging and requires an artist of great maturity to turn it into something special and unique. For now, Kappus ought to work with his own experiences. And if the experiences in his daily life seem mundane and uninteresting, he should reexamine the way he moves through the world. Poets should be able, after all, to find interest in all contexts, even if it means retreating into oneself and delving into memories and inner thoughts.

One of Rilke's biggest pieces of advice is simply that Kappus should be patient with himself. He should acknowledge that he's only a beginner. Instead of attempting extremely difficult poetic forms, Kappus should work on something a bit simpler, like recognizing beauty in his daily life. At this point in the letter, Rilke's advice begins to expand to cover not just art, but life itself. By telling Kappus to appreciate the splendor that can be found in otherwise mundane circumstances, Rilke not only helps the young man find material for his poems but also helps him move through the world in a more rewarding way.

If Kappus can retreat into himself to find poetic material in an authentic, patient way, then he'll see how pointless it is to want others to validate his work. He won't need magazines to publish his poetry—he'll know that his art has come from a place of "necessity," which is the only thing that matters. And if engaging in introspection causes Kappus to realize that he *doesn't* need to write, then that would be all right, too—but he'll have to stop writing. Still, his hard look at his own internal world will have been worthwhile. Rilke signs off his letter by expressing his fondness for Professor Horaček and thanking Kappus for writing.

Rilke's first letter to Kappus concludes by emphasizing the importance of patience and solitude. He encourages the young poet to spend time with his own thoughts instead of trying to gain approval from other people—such approval, after all, is somewhat worthless. All that matters, according to Rilke, is the poetry itself. But he also recognizes that such an approach isn't for everyone, which is why he notes that it's all right if Kappus doesn't feel like he has *to write; if this is the case, so be it, though Rilke thinks the mere process of examining oneself is always worthwhile. Therefore, his advice for Kappus to embrace introspection will be productive even if the young man decides not to apply it to writing.*

LETTER 2

Apologizing for his slow response, Rilke explains that he has been "unwell." Still, he will always enjoy receiving letters from Kappus and will try his best to help him, though to give helpful advice is quite difficult. In the end, everyone is on their own, and everything must align perfectly for one person to successfully guide another. All the same, Rilke wants to impart a couple of pieces of wisdom to the young poet.

When Rilke says that it's difficult to give helpful advice, he once again underlines the solitary nature of artistic creation. Although Rilke's suggestions might help Kappus gain a new perspective on his life as a poet, the struggle to make something beautiful and worthwhile is still something he'll have to do on his own.

First, Rilke warns Kappus about irony. Irony can be a useful tool, but it shouldn't be overused. If Kappus finds himself leaning on irony too much, he should turn his attention to very "serious" things, since irony suddenly seems insufficient and superficial in the face of art or ideas that have "depth." If Kappus truly devotes his attention to "serious" things, he'll either stop using irony altogether *or*, if he still sees it fit to use irony, he will know that he's employing it with intention in a thoughtful, meaningful way.

It's unclear why Rilke latches onto irony, though it's possible that Kappus's last letter included some irony. Regardless of Rilke's reasoning, though, his point is clear: irony can be useful, but only if it's wielded as a tool. *If it's overused, it becomes little more than something people depend on to avoid serious thought. To that end, Rilke's advice about irony is applicable to* any *literary device, as he shows Kappus how important it is to use such devices with artful intention instead of employing them mindlessly and without good reason.*

Before finishing his letter, Rilke urges Kappus to read the work of Danish writer Jens Peter Jacobsen—specifically *Six Stories* and his novel *Niels Lyhne*. Rilke wants the young poet to spend a great deal of time with these books. In particular, Jacobsen's story "Mogen" is full of wonder and reveals the "incomprehensible immensity" of life. Rilke himself has learned more about art and creativity from Jacobsen and the sculptor Auguste Rodin than anything else in his life.

The phrase "incomprehensible immensity" perfectly aligns with Rilke's interest in life's sense of deep mystery. He doesn't think language can perfectly sum up the human experience, but he does *admire art that can somehow create or tap into the "incomprehensible" feeling of existence.*

LETTER 3

Rilke is very happy to hear that Kappus has been reading Jens Peter Jacobsen. He's pleased that the young poet has resonated with the work so much and applauds him for articulating a wise point—namely, a point that took issue with something a critic wrote in the introduction to one of Jacobsen's books. Rilke agrees wholeheartedly with Kappus's thought and even tells him to avoid reading criticism, which almost always fail to grasp works of art—which are, according to Rilke, full of "infinite loneliness" that can only be understood through "love," not criticism.

Again, Rilke expresses his belief that art is full of mystery that can't be summed up by analytical language. He thinks criticism reduces literature to something too simplistic and straightforward. According to him, literature and art are—like life itself—too strange and indescribable to simplify, which is why he thinks Kappus would be better off focusing on the art itself without paying much attention to criticism and analytical writing.

Having warned the young poet about reading criticism, Rilke tells him to trust his own feelings. Even if Kappus's intuition is wrong, looking inward will eventually help him see his own errors—in other words, leading a reflective, introspective life makes it possible to really *grow*. For Rilke, being an artist means patiently waiting for ideas to blossom. And even when it seems like creativity will never come again, the young poet ought to wait and continue to reflect on life, knowing in his heart that something of beauty and value will eventually come to fruition.

In keeping with his earlier remarks about the importance of patience when it comes to writing poetry, Rilke now reassures Kappus by insisting that beauty tends to come about on its own—if, that is, an artist gives it time to grow. While it might be hard to practice artistic patience, then, the young poet should rest assured that giving himself time to ruminate will most likely lead to something beautiful and worthwhile.

Rilke goes on to both praise and criticize the author Richard Dehmel. He recognizes the power of Dehmel's books, but often worries that the writing is too self-conscious and stylized. Kappus indicated in his previous letter that he found Dehmel's writing a bit feverish, as if he's writing "in heat." Rilke builds on this idea, saying that experiencing art really is quite close to having sex, and though he thinks of this similarity as a good thing, he feels that Dehmel's work is too lustful. For Rilke, both art and sex can reveal the beauty of humanity, but Dehmel's writing doesn't do that—instead, it focuses on feverish passion, which isn't as pure and rewarding.

In a way, Rilke's comments about Richard Dehmel's writing mirrors what he has just outlined about patience. He likes Dehmel's work, but he thinks it's too urgent and passionate. In other words, he finds a certain lack of patience in Dehmel's writing. This is not to say that Rilke frowns upon writing about sex. To the contrary, he sees many parallels between art and sex, but he doesn't like the idea that sex is little more than a hotheaded rush of passion, since such an outlook reduces sex to its base parts in the same way that literary criticism reduces the mystery of literature to something lifeless and mundane.

Dehmel's work, Rilke believes, will not stand the test of time. It will fade away, but so will most works of art. Rilke therefore urges Kappus to enjoy the many merits that *do* exist in Dehmel's writing, though the young poet should be careful not to become too immersed in it. Turning his attention away from Dehmel, Rilke apologetically says that he can't send any of his own books to Kappus—he would love to, but he doesn't actually own any copies. And because he's poor, he can't buy them. Nonetheless, he encloses a list of his most recent books so that Kappus can seek them out. It brings him pleasure, he says, to think of his books in Kappus's hands.

The conclusion of Rilke's third letter to Kappus highlights his role as a mentor. He wants Kappus to be aware of the faults in Dehmel's writing, but he also wants the young poet to absorb the many admirable aspects that do *exist in Dehmel's work. He thus tries to teach Kappus to approach whatever he reads with a certain kind of intellectual curiosity, never completely disregarding something without first considering its merits and—more specifically—how those merits might give him new insight into his own artistic approach.*

LETTER 4

Rilke left Paris ten days ago, traveling north in the hopes of finding some peace. He has read and reread Kappus's most recent letter, which he finds very touching. In particular, he senses that Kappus has a "beautiful concern about life," which, rereading the letter after having left the city, jumps out at Rilke much more than it did in Paris. In the city, life is noisy and chaotic, but Rilke can now see—in the peace and quiet of the country—that it would be pointless to answer Kappus's deep questions: nobody, he says, can answer those questions for the young poet. The feelings and questions themselves live inside Kappus, and it's unlikely that the young poet can even fully articulate them, since so many things in life are inexpressible.

Once more, Rilke calls attention to the mysterious, ineffable nature of life. He doesn't want Kappus to see him as a mentor who can answer all of his questions. In fact, he doesn't even think such a mentor could ever exist, since nobody *would be able to answer Kappus's deep questions about life and art. What he* can *do, though, is help Kappus embrace his own thinking and learn to appreciate his own "beautiful concern about life."*

But even if Kappus's thoughts are inexpressible, Rilke thinks the young poet can still find answers to them—if, that is, he immerses himself in the stillness of the natural world and pays close attention to the small details that so many people overlook. If he learns to love these things, then life will feel rewarding. But reaping the reward of nature and stillness requires patience; it requires *time*. As such, Rilke implores Kappus to recognize that he's very young and that he needs to give his many misgivings and concerns the time to develop and take on a meaning of their own. He should, in other words, learn to love "the *questions themselves*."

There's no problem with unanswerable questions. To the contrary, unanswerable questions are simply part of life. Instead of dismissing them, Kappus should learn to love them. He can do so simply by appreciating the small things in life, which will eventually lead him to an understanding of the world that, though he won't necessarily be able to express it in words, will ultimately enrich his life. Above all, then, he must practice patience and move through the world with an open mind.

Rilke discusses sex, acknowledging that it can be complicated. He advises Kappus to find a way to develop a relationship with sex that is uniquely his own, rather than bowing to societal expectations surrounding sex. The problem, Rilke claims, isn't that people desire sex, but that they have it for the wrong reasons—like to distract themselves or to infuse their lives with energy. Instead, people ought to have sex as a way of reaching an elevated state of being. The natural world is full of beauty partially because it's full of sexual connection. Rilke, for his part, wishes that people wouldn't reduce sex to something so mundane and straightforward.

Rilke's thoughts about sex align with his thoughts about art. He doesn't like the idea of reducing either sex or art to something simple or straightforward. When he mentions that the natural world is full of sexual connection, he invites Kappus to consider the fact that almost everything outdoors exists because of some form of reproduction—a thought that feels almost intangible and difficult to grasp, since the natural world is so vast. It's exactly this kind of intangibility that Rilke thinks makes sex so beautiful, which is why he tells Kappus not to simply accept society's mundane approach to it. In the same way that he urges Kappus to steer clear of literary criticism when it comes to writing, he now encourages him to develop his own approach to sex.

By having sex, Rilke maintains, people become involved in something meaningful and "serious"—especially because sex can lead to new life. As two people come together and have sex, then, they connect with each other while also involving themselves in a significant act of creation. But all of this lies ahead of the young poet, who now finds himself alone. His solitude, however, doesn't mean he can't take comfort in the idea that he'll someday be involved in a "serious" kind of love. Kappus can take pleasure in his own journey toward this future love, letting the love build up in him as he matures.

Rilke suggests that there's nothing wrong with solitude. Although Kappus doesn't have a romantic partner right now, Rilke doesn't want him to rush into anything. Just like his advice about art, then, Rilke tells Kappus to give himself time to develop, hoping that the young poet will learn to appreciate his journey toward real love. In turn, it becomes particularly clear in this moment that Rilke's thoughts about art also apply to life in general.

Rilke is glad Kappus is embarking on a career that will force him to be independent. He tells the young poet to give his new profession time, patiently waiting to see if it will encroach upon his internal world—Rilke himself suspects that the job will make it difficult to have a separate life. Even so, Kappus should always look to his own sense of solitude as a constant source of comfort.

According to historical records, Franz Xaver Kappus was a military officer. At this point in his exchange with Rilke, though, he appears to be at the very beginning of his career. And though Rilke doesn't try to dissuade him from becoming an officer, he does tell him to make sure the occupation doesn't completely overtake him and deplete his capacity to think and live like an artist. And yet, he also *suggests that Kappus can always take refuge in his own solitude if he ends up feeling overwhelmed by his job. In other words, no matter what kind of professional life he leads, he will always be able to control his personal outlook.*

LETTER 5

Rilke apologizes for the delay in his response. It has been two months since he received Kappus's last letter, but he has since traveled to Rome and has not found enough peace and solitude to respond—until now, of course. He finds Rome a very sad and lonely place, especially for the first few days of living in the city. The history is interesting, but the tourism surrounding that history turns it into a strange spectacle—the ruins of ancient structures are, after all, little more than random leftovers from the past. But there is certainly beauty in Rome, just like there's beauty *anywhere*. As long as a person pays attention, there is always beauty. With some patience, it's possible to pay attention to the small things and, in doing so, really experience the wonders of Rome.

Throughout Rilke's ten letters to Kappus, the older poet's ideas remain very consistent. Even when talking about his experience in Rome, he manages to circle back to one of the main ideas he wants to impart to Kappus: the fact that there's beauty everywhere in life. Rilke personally finds Rome overwhelming and overhyped, but that doesn't stop him from finding beauty in the city, since he feels capable of doing so everywhere he goes. His ability to appreciate the world around him is a great poetic gift, since it enables him to gaze upon the world with an artistic eye. In doing so, he ends up connecting with Rome in a more authentic way, feeling its history without playing into the spectacle of tourism.

Promising to write a longer letter when he moves into a smaller, quieter room in Rome, Rilke wraps up his thoughts. He also notes that a book Kappus sent—containing his own writing—never reached him. Rilke hopes it wasn't lost in the mail and asks the young poet to confirm that it wasn't. But since the mail is so unreliable, he worries that the book might be gone. Either way, he takes great pleasure in the idea of having one of Kappus's books and assures him that he'll always read the young poet's work.

The comments Rilke makes about Kappus's book reveal that the young poet has managed to publish some of his own writing. It's logical to assume, then, that Rilke's advice has helped Kappus improve as a poet, thus hinting at the value of mentorship in general.

LETTER 6

Kappus will not, Rilke assures him, have to do without a letter on Christmas, when he's surely feeling the weight of his own solitude more than normal. He urges the young poet to revel in his own lonesomeness, since it's important to know how to be alone. Rilke compares this kind of solitude to being a child, when adults were always wrapped up in their own affairs and hardly paid attention to their children. In fact, viewing the world like a child isn't such a bad thing—if, for instance, people suddenly realize that their professions are completely disconnected from the rest of their lives, it might be helpful for them to think about their jobs with the same kind of innocence and curiosity as a child. It is helpful, sometimes, to experience "incomprehension."

Rilke's thoughts about solitude dovetail into a discussion of childhood. By talking about the kind of pleasant, rewarding "incomprehension" that children often experience, Rilke essentially encourages Kappus to recapture a certain childlike wonder about life. This wonder is especially useful and illuminating for people living in solitude, since it will help them embrace the idea of spending time alone. Instead of wallowing in loneliness, Kappus can try to take interest in himself and the surrounding world in the same way that a curious child might.

Rilke wants Kappus to respect his own inner world. He had a feeling that Kappus's profession would turn out to be discouraging and unrewarding, but he can't offer him any words of comfort—other than to suggest that *all* professions likely feel meaningless and deflating, as people slowly realize that their jobs are tiresome and disconnected from their private lives. Even if Kappus hadn't become an officer, he would have felt the same way about his job.

It makes sense to assume that Kappus complained in his last letter about his job, which has turned out to be unrewarding. But Rilke isn't surprised and, instead of telling Kappus to quit his job, he implies that the modern working world simply doesn't align with a more sensitive, artistic existence. Most people, Rilke intimates, are unhappy in their professions, so the trick isn't to find a better job—rather, the trick is to learn how to still live an artistic life in spite *of everything else.*

If Kappus feels no connection with the people around him, that's all right. Rilke urges him to seek out a connection with the natural world. Moreover, he suggests that Kappus can always think back to childhood and, in doing so, find happiness and peace.

Simply put, Rilke recognizes that Kappus feels unhappy in his profession, but he also thinks there's an easy way to deal with this lack of fulfillment. All Kappus needs to do, Rilke suggests, is engage with the world around him in a way that enriches his life—he doesn't need a rewarding job, in other words, because he can find fulfillment elsewhere by having an open and poetic mind.

Rilke turns his attention to Kappus's relationship with God, challenging the idea (which Kappus himself possibly proposed in his own letter) that he has lost touch with God since becoming an adult. Rilke suggests that Kappus never truly had a firm hold on God in the first place—how could a child really have such a full, meaningful relationship with God? Rather than having *lost* God, then, Rilke proposes that Kappus should see his relationship with God as something that is just beginning—as something that will *always* be in the process of beginning, as if it's a constantly unfolding relationship. Whatever Kappus experiences in life is part of his developing relationship with God: the small moments of happiness, the periods of mundanity—*everything*.

Rilke's approach to religion is somewhat complicated, but his main point is that a relationship with something as vast and significant as God could never be fixed or straightforward. Rather, it must always be evolving, just like life itself is always moving forward and changing. The way people relate to the world, then, is a lot like how they relate to the idea of a higher spiritual power, since both relationships are constantly unfolding. In turn, this view of religion will help Kappus remain attentive to the shifts and developments in his own life, since anything that happens in his life is also part of his relationship with God, and vice versa.

Kappus should spend his Christmas with these serious spiritual thoughts in mind. He should also recognize that the moments of "transition" in his life are the moments in which he is perhaps closest to God, since he's striving so hard toward a meaningful spiritual relationship. Therefore, he must be patient, happy, and self-assured.

Like most things Rilke talks about, his discussion of God comes back to the importance of patience. Kappus shouldn't rush to some kind of spiritual epiphany. Instead, he should recognize that his religious faith is in a moment of "transition," which gives him an opportunity to grow. In order to grow, though, he must bide his time and let his thoughts and feelings take shape.

LETTER 7

Rilke acknowledges that it has been a while since he received Kappus's last letter. But he couldn't write because he was dealing with poor health. Now, though, he feels better and can finally write a response. Enclosed with the letter is a **sonnet** by Kappus that Rilke has copied out with his own hand. He likes the sonnet very much and wants the young poet to have the experience of reading his own work written out in someone else's hand—it will seem foreign and strange, but this strangeness will allow Kappus to fully feel the beautiful effect of his own words.

The fact that Rilke takes so much pleasure in Kappus's sonnet suggests that Kappus is developing into a stronger poet. When he first wrote to Rilke, he sent poems that Rilke said had no unique style—they were, in other words, generic and unremarkable. Now, though, Kappus's sonnet is moving enough to inspire Rilke to copy it out and send it back to him, indicating that he recognizes and appreciates the strides the young poet has made as an artist.

Returning once again to the topic of solitude, Rilke tells Kappus not to give up on it just because he feels an impulse to leave his lonesomeness behind. The desire to "break out" of solitude might actually *help* the young poet; people tend to take the path of least resistance in life, always doing what's easiest. But there's something valuable about difficulty. And solitude, of course, is difficult. Therefore, Kappus should revel in solitude *because* it's hard and taxing.

Rilke's fondness for difficulty might seem counterproductive at first, since many people view difficulty as something to be avoided. But Rilke believes the opposite: challenging experiences actually lead to growth, since they put people to the test and force them to somehow rise above difficulty. In terms of solitude, this might mean learning how to live with a feeling of loneliness. Instead of despairing and fixating on the sad feeling of being alone, Rilke implies that Kappus should learn to appreciate his solitude, which gives him the space and time to revel in the world's beauty. In this way, solitude enriches his life, despite (or perhaps because *of) its difficulty.*

Another difficult thing in life is love. Rilke thinks that figuring out how to *truly* love someone might be the most difficult task on earth. Young people therefore have to learn how to love, but the very process of learning is always hard and full of solitude. Loving, then, is also a surprisingly solitary endeavor, at least at first. In fact, love doesn't mean completely uniting and "merging" with another person—after all, in order for two people to come together, they first must be their own people; they must be fully-formed individuals. In a way, then, love encourages people to become themselves.

Solitude is very important for Rilke, but he also speaks fondly of love and romantic connection. It might seem like solitude and love are at odds with one another, but he outlines in this moment why this is not the case. In order for two people to truly come together in a meaningful way, they have to each have their own sense of autonomy. They have to be individuals, since it would be a lot less meaningful for two things to "merge" if they weren't distinct from each other in the first place. Solitude and love are therefore not at odds with one another—to the contrary, they complement each other.

Young people tend to rush into love, their lives becoming intertwined before they even manage to establish themselves as individuals. Their romantic relationships suffer as a result, and instead of experiencing a rich, complex, and unique bond, they end up mindlessly following social customs surrounding love. Rilke also points out that society tends to treat women as mere counterparts to men. Soon, though, he predicts that society will come to recognize women as true individuals—femininity will become not just "an opposite of the masculine, but something in itself." When this happens, the nature of romantic relationships will change, since it will be easier for lovers to come together as individuals: each lover will have their own independence and solitude, making it easier to develop stronger bonds.

In the same way that Rilke doesn't think young poets like Kappus should immediately attempt difficult poetic forms, he doesn't think young people should jump headlong into romantic relationships. In order for a romantic bond to be rewarding, both partners have to be fully formed individuals, so devoting oneself to someone else before having the time to fully mature isn't such a good idea (according to Rilke, that is). For this reason, he looks forward to the day when society gives women more room to embrace a sense of autonomy, which will not only enrich their lives but will also strengthen their romantic relationships.

LETTER 8

Stating that there's nothing he can say to help Kappus, Rilke notes that the young poet has experienced many sad things in life, all of which have passed. But Kappus suggested in his previous letter that letting his sadness fade is difficult in and of itself. Rilke, however, wonders if sadness has fundamentally changed Kappus—his sorrow hasn't just left, but has altered the way Kappus moves through the world. If humans were able to see the future and recognize how sadness has changed them for the better, Rilke thinks people would actively *embrace* sorrow. After all, sorrow brings on transition and change.

It's unclear why Kappus is sad, but that's not the most important thing about what Rilke says in this letter. Rather, what's important is Rilke's suggestion that sadness fundamentally alters people even after it passes. Rilke doesn't see this alteration as a bad thing, though. Rather, he sees it as yet another example of how difficulty often leads to growth and positive change. Instead of turning away from sadness, then, Kappus should learn to appreciate it in its own right.

Sorrow is difficult and frightening because it plunges people into moments of transition. In the depths of sadness, people sense that something has changed in their lives. And embracing this change is scary, since nobody knows where their sadness might take them or how they might change because of it—they therefore have to face the "inexplicable" nature of life, which is daunting. But Kappus should *embrace* uncertainty. He shouldn't be afraid of sadness but should instead trust that he'll grow during periods of sorrow.

When people are sad, it's often because something has changed in their lives. Perhaps a loved one has died. Or, less dramatically, maybe they've just lost their sense of joy. Either way, something has happened to destabilize their happiness, so sadness actually becomes a moment of transition. Because Rilke believes in the value of difficulty and uncertainty, though, he thinks that this transition is something that ought to be welcomed. Although it's scary to embrace the idea of transitioning into a new way of life (however small the change might be), Rilke recognizes that these are the moments in which people grow and become more emotionally alive, which is why he tells Kappus not to deny the powerful and transformative impact of his own sorrow.

The young poet shouldn't turn away from pain or "melancholy," since it's impossible to know how, exactly, these feelings are currently impacting him as a person. What's more, he should remember that sickness is—though unpleasant—an important process; it heals the body. Rilke believes that sadness works the same way. Before signing off his letter, Rilke warns Kappus against assuming that Rilke himself doesn't struggle with the same issues. The only reason he can offer advice alongside some comforting words is that he, too, knows what it's like to experience deep sadness.

Rilke makes an informative comparison between emotional pain and physical sickness to reinforce his idea that difficulty is worth embracing. It's obviously unpleasant to be sick, but sickness is how the body cures itself. The point of a fever, for instance, is to kill off the virus or bacteria threatening the body. Experiencing something like sadness is similar to being sick; it's a good way of building personal growth. Consequently, Kappus shouldn't run from sorrow, nor should he assume that Rilke himself doesn't struggle with it—just like sickness, sadness is something that plagues everyone.

LETTER 9

Even if he takes a long time to reply, Rilke assures Kappus that he thinks about him very often. In response to Kappus's previous letter, Rilke says there's no reason for him to address each of the young poet's concerns—the advice Rilke has always offered will suffice in this situation, too: namely, that Kappus should practice patience when dealing with feelings of doubt. Life will sort everything out. And any emotion that fully seizes the young poet is worth embracing. Lastly, Rilke urges Kappus to see doubt as something he can "train" and use to his advantage. He should pay attention to his doubting thoughts, always asking *why* he feels doubtful in the first place and putting his doubt to the test. In this way, he will develop a very useful way of thinking.

Rilke's ninth letter to Kappus mainly reiterates what he has already said about embracing difficulty, not turning away from challenging emotions, and practicing patience. If Kappus doubts himself, that's not necessarily a bad thing, since he can further examine his doubt in useful ways. At the same time, though, Rilke's overall implication is that Kappus should maintain a sense of self-assurance, allowing himself to interrogate whatever feeling or thought comes up. By showing a confident kind of patience, he will open up space for himself to wrestle with otherwise unsettling emotions.

LETTER 10

Rilke expresses how happy he was to receive a letter from Kappus. He has been thinking about the young poet as the days march toward Christmas, imagining how peaceful and quiet it must be where Kappus has been stationed as an officer amongst hills in the country. In the end, he's glad that Kappus found his way into the existence he currently leads, in which he wears a uniform and lives a life that makes room for solitude and reflection.

Rilke's final letter to Kappus is dated four years after their last correspondence. Based on his comments about Kappus wearing a uniform, it appears that the young poet has continued on his trajectory as a military officer. But Rilke doesn't see this profession as something that has held Kappus back or kept him from leading a thoughtful, artistic life. To the contrary, Rilke is happy that being an officer has given Kappus the space to embrace his own solitude, ultimately implying that leading a meaningful life doesn't necessarily have to mean finding a job that perfectly aligns with a person's primary passion, as long as it creates conditions that make it possible for that person to continue cultivating that passion.

Art, Rilke says, is just a way of life. Many people go into professions that are adjacent to art, assuming that such a lifestyle will enrich their artistic sensibilities. But Rilke thinks such existences often detract from a person's ability to live a truly artistic life. It is better, then, that Kappus has found a way to be "serious and courageous" while living in a "rough reality." Rilke ends by expressing his hope that the approaching year will help the young poet continue to live in this manner.

For Rilke, there is very little—if any—distinction between life and art. He sees Kappus's ability to live in a "serious and courageous" way as something that will feed into the young poet's artistic endeavors. After all, Rilke believes that leading an enriching life fuels artistic creation, so it doesn't matter that Kappus's profession as a military officer technically has nothing to do with art. In fact, Rilke thinks it's better *for artists to go into unrelated fields, since jobs that hover around art—like, for instance, literary criticism—can deplete an artist's ability to actually create. As such, Rilke is glad that Kappus has stuck with his military career and seems to think that it will benefit the young poet in the long term.*

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