

**1970 Poem: “Elegy for Jane” (Theodore Roethke)**

Prompt: Write an essay in which you describe the speaker’s attitude toward his former student, Jane.

**Elegy for Jane by Theodore Roethke**

I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils;  
And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;  
And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her,  
And she balanced in the delight of her thought,  
A wren, happy, tail into the wind,  
Her song trembling the twigs and small branches. The shade sang with her;  
The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing,  
And the mould sang in the bleached valleys under the rose.  
Oh, when she was sad, she cast herself down into such a pure depth,  
Even a father could not find her: Scraping her cheek against straw,  
Stirring the clearest water.  
My sparrow, you are not here,  
Waiting like a fern, making a spiney shadow.  
The sides of wet stones cannot console me,  
Nor the moss, wound with the last light. If only I could nudge you from this sleep,  
My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.  
Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:  
I, with no rights in this matter,  
Neither father nor lover.

The speaker was very fond of Jane, in an endearing, curious, and fleeting way. The prompt suggests that Jane was the speaker's former student, making him her teacher. He looks upon Jane's grave (which I'm assuming was untimely) with grief and tenderness. He holds neither the love of a relative, nor the romantic love of a partner; the love the speaker has for Jane is different. It is the strange and difficult to express love of a teacher for a particularly special pupil.

In the poem the speaker references traits he observed about Jane, all thought of fondly. He reflects on how she talked with "light syllables" and how she was "balanced in her delight." The speaker enjoyed Jane's lovely and delicate voice and way of talking and he reflects on the way she was gentle and soft with her excitement. He describes how when she was sad she fell all the way down into her despair. Jane was someone who felt emotions deep and the speaker loved that about her.

He describes her multiple times like a bird; using terms like "wren," "pigeon" and "sparrow." This suggests that he thought of Jane like a small feathered creature. Delicate and pretty, with a strong voice but quick to take flight.

The speaker being a teacher, Jane must have been a good student to elicit such fond thoughts from him. How he describes her easy-spoken manner and balanced but emotional disposition does make a good case for a thoughtful, hardworking, and respectful student. Like a bird she probably spoke strongly, but only when most important.

The speaker feels guilty for feeling so much for Jane. He says he "has no rights in this manner." It can be awkward for a teacher to have such large feelings for a student. However, he does feel these things because he enjoyed Jane's presence and disposition and now she is gone. This poem is laced with mixed feelings of love, grief, and shame as the speaker wrestles to decide which of his emotions is the most suitable for the situation: his fondness for Jane, his grief over her death, or his guilt that he was so attached to one of his students. In the poem he is reflective and he acknowledges the strangeness of the situation but goes on to express his love for her and his sadness that she is gone.