In the early 2000s, César Vallejo was considered Peru’s greatest poet, and the first line of “The Black Heralds” was said to be known by every Peruvian. Written after his move to Lima from a country village in 1916, the poem was included in a collection to be published in 1918, but Vallejo waited to issue the book until Abraham Valdelomar, an avant-garde writer, could add an introduction. However, Valdelomar died suddenly, so Vallejo released the book in 1919. There has been a confusion about the date of publication ever since. The collection was praised by Vallejo’s own artistic community; however, there were few sales and few reviews. The public was accustomed to modernismo and symbolism in verse, not Vallejo’s emotional and social outcry.

As time would show, The Black Heralds was actually the most traditional of Vallejo’s works, a blend of modernistic influences and the unique style of structure and language that he developed even more in later works. Nonetheless, the basic themes addressed in The Black Heralds remained important elements in all of his poetry: suffering, compassion, and the various components of existential anguish. All of these elements find expression in the title poem. “The Black Heralds” opens the collection and sets a tone for the rest of the book of bitter sentiments and blasphemous rebellion, as well as a compassionate understanding of suffering. Although his first book of poetry, The Black Heralds was the last of Vallejo’s works to
be translated into English. Two later publications of the title poem can be found: in the 1990 English edition of Los Heraldos Negros, the translation by Kathleen Ross and Richard Schaaf; and in the 2006 collection The Complete Poetry of Cesar Vallejo, the translation by Clayton Eshleman.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

César Abraham Vallejo was born on March 16, 1892, in Santiago de Chuco, Peru, the youngest of eleven children in a family of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage. After graduating from high school in 1908, Vallejo attempted to attend college but had to withdraw because of a lack of funds. So he went to work as a clerk in his father’s notary public office, then in the office of a mining company. He worked as a tutor to the children of a wealthy mine owner and as a cashier in the accounting office of a sugar plantation. Added to his rural upbringing, these experiences furthered his concern about the social injustices in Peru. In 1913, he formally enrolled at the University of Trujillo, where he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in 1915 and later earned both a master’s degree in Spanish literature and a law degree.

During his college years, Vallejo joined a progressive circle of writers and intellectuals. Within this group, he discovered Latin American modernism and French symbolism, as well as political radicalism. After a few tumultuous romantic involvements, Vallejo moved to Lima in 1917. He took a job as a teacher and later principal of a prestigious private school but was fired after he refused to marry the woman with whom he was having an affair. This event, coupled with the death of his mother, prompted him to visit his home. Once there, Vallejo found himself unintentionally involved in a violent uprising. Although innocent, Vallejo was charged as an instigator and spent three months in jail. He was released on parole, but the experience embittered him for the rest of his life.

Vallejo won the Peruvian National Short Story Contest in 1921. However, his first two books of poetry, The Black Heralds (1919) (which contains the title poem) and Trilce (1922), were ill-received, so Vallejo moved to Paris in 1923. He worked for a press agency and continued with his own writing, but for the rest of his life he barely made enough money to support himself.

In the late 1920s, he participated in communist activities and visited the Soviet Union three times. After an arrest in Paris, Vallejo moved to Madrid and was allowed back in Paris only when he promised to refrain from all political activities. He did so until the outbreak in 1936 of the Spanish Civil War whose republican cause reinvigorated his political involvement. Consequently, he visited Spain twice and saw for himself the horrors of war, which inspired the acclaimed poetic collection, Spain, Take This Cup from Me (1937).

Besides poetry, Vallejo wrote a novel, Tungsten (1931), as well as numerous articles and essays, and five plays that were never published or produced in his lifetime. He married Georgette Philipart in 1934, and after he died of a lingering fever in Paris on April 15, 1938, she published his final collection of poetry, Human Poems, in 1939.

**POEM TEXT**

There are blows in life, so hard ... I just don’t know!  
Blows as from God’s hatred; as if, before them, the backwash of everything suffered welled-up in the soul ... I just don’t know!  
They are few, but they are ... They open dark furrows  
in the fiercest face and in the strongest back.  
Perhaps they are the steeds of barbarian Attilas,  
or the black heralds Death sends us.  
They are the deep falls of the Christs of the soul,  
of some worshipping faith Destiny blasphemes.  
Those bloody blows are the cracking  
of some bread burning up on us at the oven door.  
And man ... Poor ... poor man! Turns his eyes, as  
when a slap on the shoulder summons us;  
turns his eyes wild, and everything lived  
well-up like a pool of guilt in his gaze.  
There are blows in life, so hard ... I just don’t know!

**POEM SUMMARY**

**Stanza 1**  
The first line of “The Black Heralds” is one of the most memorable in Spanish poetry: “There are blows in life so powerful ... I just don’t know!” The intensity of the poem is immediately
established with the subject of the painful blows and the questioning they engender, although a question is not asked but is left to the reader’s imagination by the ellipsis before the answer, “I just don’t know!” The line is the cry of the oppressed as they struggle to understand why life is so hard.

In the second through fourth lines, Vallejo says that these blows are as terrible as if they were from “God’s hatred.” These blows are so strong that they are capable of causing all the memories of one’s suffering to well up, capable of causing the pain to rise up from the depths of the soul to the surface. However, the author repeats the use of the ellipsis to create a pause that makes the “I just don’t know” phrase that follows into an outcry of exasperation and frustration, as if to question his own analogy or to emphasize the impossibility of knowing why terrible things happen.

Stanza 2
Here the narrator says that even when there are only a few hard blows in one’s life, any of them can cause deep wounds, “dark furrows,” in even the “fiercest face and in the strongest back.” The word “dark” may simply be a reference to the usually darker, redder skin color of scars, but it may also mean “dark” as in the black depths of the soul that the furrows represent or as in the dark recesses of the mind that are repressed after trauma.

In the third line, Vallejo compares the blows to “the steeds of barbarian Attilas.” This phrase is a reference to the notorious historical figure, Attila the Hun, ruler of a tribe of warrior nomads who terrorized the Roman Empire for a number of years in the middle of the fifth century. Attila was known as the Scourge of God, so an allusion to this barbaric invader is fitting in a poem that in the previous stanza talked about “God’s hatred.”

Another comparison of the blows is made in the fourth line to “the black heralds Death sends us.” The word “angel” is from the Greek word “angeslos” meaning messenger, and another word for messenger is herald (in some translations of this poem the word messenger is used instead of herald), although herald carries the connotation of one who makes an announcement. Vallejo is probably making a reference to the concept of an Angel of Death that is sent by God to guide the dead on their journey to heaven or hell. Whether the murderous barbarian or those who pronounce death, the idea is that the blows of life bring terror and devastation.

Stanza 3
Continuing to make comparisons, in this stanza Vallejo does not say that the blows cause falls to the ground, but that they are falls, “deep falls of the Christs of the soul.” It is an odd phrase that combines the cause and effect. The image that is evoked is that of Christ as he fell three times carrying his cross on the road to Calvary. Therefore, the falls are those of “some worshipping faith” that teaches hope and salvation, a faith
that "Destiny blasphemes" because it is a useless faith to those who live and die in such misery.

In one last comparison, Vallejo writes the "bloodstained" blows are like the "crackling / of some bread burning up on us at the oven door." Perhaps the blows are described as bloodstained to make a connection to the red color of the fire that is burning the bread. Bread is often called the "staff of life" because it has been for millennia a staple in the diet of humans, so the burning bread represents the life that is being consumed by the blows of tragedy. The bread does not even get out of the oven, does not make it past the door to perform its life-affirming purpose before it is destroyed by forces that do not allow individual fulfillment.

Stanza 4

In the last of the four-line stanzas, Vallejo turns to describing the recipient of the blows: "And man . . . Poor . . . poor man!" Here, the speaker pauses in his complaint about the blows to express sympathy for the plight of the poor human and to emphasize the depth of the tragedy of the laborer through the pauses inserted by the ellipses. Vallejo then paints an image of the worker who, when summoned to further labor, looks over his shoulder with eyes as wild as those of a caged animal, eyes crazed by the madness of it all. In those eyes is a reflection of the experiences of life, the "backwash of everything suffered" mentioned in the third line of the first stanza. It is as if it these experiences of hardship were deserved for some unknowable sin.

Stanza 5

The last stanza repeats the first line of the first stanza. The effect is to emphasize the depth of the desolation and despair felt by the speaker about human limitations, the harshness of life, and life's mysteries.

THEMES

Suffering

The indigenous Peruvians, descendents of the great Incans, were subjected to centuries of abuse and exploitation by Spanish colonial rule. Half Indian and a speaker of Quechua, Vallejo shared this heritage and observed its effects in his provincial village and on the plantation where he worked for a time. The suffering he witnessed is reflected in "The Black Heralds," in which the speaker’s life is characterized as filled with agony that cannot find expression in words but leaves the speaker frustrated and despairing. Typical of all oppressed peoples, the subject of the poem cries out for relief from the brutality of existence yet quells desperation with a fatalistic sadness about the condition which seems his destiny. Nonetheless, there is a hint of the pride of a mighty people who hunger for their rightful place, so long lost. The suffering described is both physical and emotional: blows that leave wounds in the flesh, damage faith, and drive a person to crazed desperation and confusion.

Life, Death, and God

Vallejo was greatly disturbed by questions concerning the reason for life. The specter of the grave tormented him because of his view that life is a steady march toward death. In "The Black Heralds," the title is a reference to the "black heralds sent to us by Death," and the "deep falls of the Christs of the soul" alludes to the final walk that Christ made going to his crucifixion. Perhaps Vallejo does not believe that Christ ever reached Calvary or enacted a resurrection to save humankind because in this poem the blows that cause the soul to fall are ongoing. The argument here is that a merciful God who gave the world a savior would not behave as does the hateful God that Vallejo depicts. These sentiments provide the reason that the message in "The Black Heralds" is described as questioning and challenging God, if not being outright blasphemous. Definitely, the message is one of acute, painful frustration at being unable to determine why life is so hard.

Existential Anguish

"The Black Heralds" is an excellent example of existential anguish. The poem contains classic descriptions of the existentialist experience: trying to create meaning from a world that has no meaning but is empty and confusing; trying to understand the purpose of an existence that makes no sense; trying to establish the freedom and responsibility of the individual in relation to established ethics and morality; trying to endure the hardships of life when there seems to be no valid reason or reward to do so. Angst is often associated with existentialism because there is so much anxiety, guilt, and isolation that comes with individual responsibility and that stems