

English 300

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Discussion Question on Horace's *Ars Poetica*

[What does Horace accomplish by placing first-person questions throughout his *Ars Poetica*?]

Ars Poetica by Horace is written as an instructive piece on the art of poetry. Occasionally during the narrative Horace asks questions in a way that sounds like they are directed inwardly. For example, he asks "Why do I prefer to be ignorant than learn, out of sheer false shame?" (126) in his discussion of poetic ability, and "does that entitle *me* to make mistakes and scribble away carelessly?" (130) in his discussion of the impossibility of all critics being able to pick up a poet's mistakes. In both these questions, it would appear that he is asking himself these things, but I believe he is accomplishing much more. Because Horace's writing is so poetic, readers of his work become immersed in it, and therefore they end up asking themselves the same questions. This was likely Horace's intention. He is working with the notion of self-reflexivity, and the idea that his readers (who were probably either poets, or critics of poetry) will in turn ask themselves the same questions, and better realize the mistakes they are making. Of course he does not believe he is entitled to make mistakes, rather, he is making his readers understand how ignorant and unprofessional it is to make careless errors in poetry. At the same time, it makes them analyze their own works of literature, asking themselves if they too make these errors. If Horace had asked the same questions in a way that replaced the "I's" with "You's", people would feel judged by the statement and get defensive. This is a powerful question, because the only other option other than care and consideration when dealing with poetry is ignorance, and people don't want to be ignorant. By using these quotes that are indirectly asking his audience

the question, Horace accomplishes improving both the poet's knowledge of his errors, and in accordance, their knowledge of what is correct.